This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

HD WIDENER
HW KQUW S

Digitized by Google

22413.18.5.16

HARVARD COLLEGE LIBRARY

THE BEQUEST OF

Grenville L. Winthrop

1943

This book is not to be sold or exchanged

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

The Works of Leonard Merrick

THE MAN WHO UNDERSTOOD WOMEN

AND OTHER STORIES

Digitized by Google

The Works of

LEONARD MERRICK

CONRAD IN QUEST OF HIS YOUTH. With an Introduction by SIR J. M. BARRIE.

WHEN LOVE FLIES OUT O' THE WINDOW. With an Introduction by SIR WILLIAM ROBERTSON NICOLL.

THE QUAINT COMPANIONS. With an Introduction by H. G. WELLS.

THE POSITION OF PEGGY HARPER. With an Introduction by SIR ARTHUR PINERO.

THE MAN WHO UNDERSTOOD WOMEN and other Stories. With an Introduction by W. J. LOCKE.

THE WORLDLINGS. With an Introduction by NEIL MUNRO.

THE ACTOR-MANAGER. With an Introduction by W. D. HOWELLS.

CYNTHIA. With an Introduction by MAURICE HEWLETT.

ONE MAN'S VIEW. With an Introduction by GRANVILLE BARKER.

THE MAN WHO WAS GOOD. With an Introduction by J. K. PROTHERO.

A CHAIR ON THE BOULEVARD. With an Introduction by A. NEIL LYONS.

THE HOUSE OF LYNCH. With an Introduction by G. K. CHESTERTON.

WHILE PARIS LAUGHED: BEING PRANKS AND PASSIONS OF THE POET TRICOTRIN.

NEW YORK

E. P. DUTTON & COMPANY

Digitized by Google

THE MAN WHO UNDERSTOOD WOMEN

AND OTHER STORIES

By LEONARD MERRICK

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
W. J. LOCKE

NEW YORK
E. P. DUTTON AND COMPANY
681 FIFTH AVENUE

Digitized by Google

COPYRIGHT, 1911,
BY MITCHELL KENNERLY

COPYRIGHT, 1919,
BY E. P. DUTTON AND COMPANY

All Rights Reserved

22443.18.5.16

HARVARD
UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY
JAN 5 1956

THIS EDITION IS LIMITED TO 1550 COPIES, OF WHICH ONLY 1500 ARE FOR SALE

Printed in the United States of America

Digitized by Google

CONTENTS

		PAGE
I	THE MAN WHO UNDERSTOOD WOMEN	1
II	A VERY GOOD THING FOR THE GIRL	18
III	THE WOMAN WHO WISHED TO DIE	35
IV	FRANKENSTEIN II	50
V	THE TALE THAT WOULDN'T DO	68
VI	THE LAURELS AND THE LADY	81
VII	THE CHILD IN THE GARDEN	160
VIII	A LETTER TO THE DUCHESS	180
IX	THE PRINCE IN THE FAIRY TALE	200
X	WITH INTENT TO DEFRAUD	224

Digitized by Google

PAGE

XI

DEAD VIOLETS 239

XII

THE FAVOURITE PLOT 259

XIII

TIME, THE HUMORIST 277

XIV

THE BACK OF BOHEMIA 293

XV

THE LADY OF LYONS' 313

XVI

THE THIRD M 326

XVII

THE BISHOP'S COMEDY 344

XVIII

A REVERIE 364

XIX

THE RECONCILIATION 368

XX

THE CALL FROM THE PAST 383

Digitized by Google

INTRODUCTION

ONE of our most delightful novelists has recently written a preface to a collection of his short stories in which he apologises for disinterring them from magazines and resuscitating them in book form. I think he ought not to have done it. If a preface were needed, it should have been written rather as an appeal, than as a warning. It should have been in the nature of a bugle-blast. It should have said, in effect: "Here, my faithful and gentle readers who, owing to the limitations of time and space and the worries of the world, have missed much of my best and most cherished work—here is an opportunity of an unexpected feast." I confess that such an appeal would not have been modest—and the author in question is the most modest of our confraternity—but the assertion would have been true. Now, with the agreeable task before me of writing a preface to another man's collection, I am not bound by any such sense of modesty, and I should like to make clear once more certain issues which my friend above referred to has, to a certain extent, confused.

Digitized by Google

In the first place, it must be understood that the novel and the short story are two entirely distinct artistic expressions, as different as the great oil-painting and the miniature. And as rarely as the accomplished landscape-painter and the accomplished miniaturist are incarnate in one and the same individual, so rarely are the accomplished novelist and the accomplished short story writer thus incarnate. The most fervent admirers of Mr. Rudyard Kipling, among whom I am proud to count myself, will not claim for his novels, though possessing the incalculable and indefinable personal touch, the magical genius of expression which is to be found in all his work —even in *The Absent-minded Beggar,* the perfection of statement and the flawless technique of *Plain Tales from the Hills* and *Life's Handicap.* In the same way we would not measure Guy de Maupassant's greatness by *Une Vie* or *Mont Oriol;* and though the late Henry Harland is best known by that study in sunshine, *The Cardinal's Snuff-box,* his real lovers turn to the inimitable short stories in *Grey Roses* and *Comedies and Errors.*

Conversely, some of the greatest novelists have but little value as short story writers. The so-called short stories of Dickens—*The Cricket on the Hearth, The Chimes, A Christmas Carol*—

Digitized by Google

are between thirty and forty thousand words in length. Among Thackeray's many sketches may be found a few which we understand as short stories, but they do not rank with *Henry Esmond* and *The Newcomes*.

The essential novelist accustomed to his broad canvas, to the multiplicity of human destinies with which he is concerned and their inter-relation, to his varied backgrounds, to the free space which his art allows him both for minute analysis of character and for his own philosophical reflections on life, is apt to find himself absurdly cramped within the narrow confines of the short story. His short stories have a way of becoming condensed novels. They contain more stuff than they ought to hold, at a sacrifice of balance, directness and clearness of exposition. Now, without dogmatising in the conventional fashion, or indeed in any fashion, over what a short story ought or ought not to be, or asserting definite laws of technique, I think it is obvious that if a story told in ten thousand words would have been a better, clearer, more fully developed story told in a hundred thousand, it is not a perfectly told story. For, though there is a modern tendency to revolt against an older school of criticism which set technique over subject, and to scoff at form, yet we cannot get away from the fact that

Digitized by Google

the told story, whether long or short, is a work of art, and is subject to the eternal canons whereby every art is governed. No matter what a man has to say, if he does not strive to express it perfectly, he is offending. The "condensed novel," being imperfect, is an offence.

On the other hand, the essential short story writer engaged upon a novel, is apt to be dismayed by the vastness of the canvas he has to cover. His habit of mind—minute, delicate and swift—wars against a conception of the architectonics of a novel. In consequence, his novel may appear thin, episodical and laboured, with scenes spun out beyond their value, thus missing their dramatic effect and spoiling the balance of the work. If, therefore, a story of a hundred thousand words could have been told more effectively in ten thousand, it is, like the "condensed novel," not a perfectly told story.

Briefly, the tendency of the essential novelist in writing a short story is to make literary condensed milk, while that of the essential short story writer working in the medium of a novel is to make milk and water.

Occasionally, of course, among the great writers of fiction we meet with the combination of the two faculties. Balzac the short story writer is as great as Balzac the novelist. The *Contes Dro-*

Digitized by Google

latiques alone would have brought him fame. Stevenson was master of both crafts. Who shall say whether *The Sire de Malétroit's Door* or *The Ebb Tide* is the more perfect work of art?

Now among contemporary writers, Mr. Leonard Merrick is eminently one who, like Balzac and Stevenson, is gifted with the double faculty. His reputation as a novelist rests on a sure foundation, and his novels in this edition of his works will be dealt with by other hands. But, owing to the fact of the novel being in the commercial world "more important" than the short story, his claim to the distinct reputation of a short story writer has more or less been overlooked. Again, it is popularly supposed that a writer of fiction regards the short story as either a relaxation from more arduous toil or as a means of adding a few extra pounds to his income. In his acquiescence in this disastrous superstition lies my quarrel with my distinguished preface-writing friend. Now, although I do not say that we are all such high-minded folk that none of us has ever stooped to "pot-boiling," yet I assert that every conscientious artist approaches a short story with the same earnestness as he does a novel. Further, that in proportion to its length he devotes to it more concentration, more loving and scrupulous care. There are days during the

Digitized by Google

writing of a novel when that combination of fierce desire to work and sense of power which one loosely talks about as "inspiration," is at ebb, and others when it is at flow. Homer nods sometimes. No man can bestow equal essence of himself on every page of a long novel. But a short story is generally written at full-tide. By its nature it can be finished before the impulse is over. There is time to weigh every word of it, attend to the rhythm of every sentence, adjust the delicate balance of the various parts, and there is the thrilling consciousness of unity. Instead of the climax being months off, there it is at hand to be reached in a few glad hours. So, far from being an unconsidered trifle, the short story is a work of intense consideration, and as far as our poor words can matter, of profound importance.

It may be said that anything in the nature of a plea for the short story as a work of art is hopelessly belated—I am quite aware that the wise and gifted made it long ago, and I remember the preaching of the apostles of the early 'nineties—but its repetition is none the less useful. Every item in the welter of short stories with which the innumerable magazines both here and in America flood the reading public is not a masterpiece. Every item is not perfect work. Many are exceedingly bad—bad in conception, style

Digitized by Google

and form. There is always the danger of the good being hidden, of bad and good being confused together in the public mind, and of the term "magazine story" becoming one of contemptuous and unthinking reproach, as was the term "yellow-back" a generation ago. Accordingly it is well that now and again a word should be said in deprecation of an attitude which a tired and fiction-worn world is liable to adopt; and it is well to remind it that in the aforesaid welter there are many beautiful works of art, and to beseech it to exercise discrimination.

The writer of an introduction to the work of a literary comrade labours under certain difficulties. He ought not to usurp the functions of the critic into whose hands the volume, when published, will come, and he is anxious, for the sake of prudence, not to use the language of hyperbole, though he has it in his heart to do so. But, at least, I can claim for these short stories of Mr. Leonard Merrick, that each, by its perfection of form and the sincerity of its making, takes rank as a work of art. In none is there a word too little or a word too much. Everywhere one sees evidence of the pain through which the soul of the artist has passed on its way to the joy of creation. Everywhere is seen the firmness of outline which only comes by conviction of truth, and

Digitized by Google

the light and shade which is only attained by a man who loves his craft.

The field covered by Mr. Merrick in this collection is one which he has made peculiarly his own. Mainly it is the world of the artist, the poet, the journalist, in the years when hopes are high and funds are low, when the soul is full and the stomach empty. It is neither the Bohemia of yesterday's romance nor the Bohemia of drunken degradation, but the sober, clean-living, struggling Bohemia of to-day. It is a sedate, hard-up world of omnibuses, lodgings, second-rate tea shops and restaurants. Yet he does not belong to the static school who set down the mere greyness of their conditions. He is a poet, making—

> "The violet of a legend blow
> Among the chops and steaks,"

as in *The Lady of Lyons'*. To Rosie McLeod, living "up ninety-eight stairs of a dingy house in a dilapidated court" in Montparnasse, comes the prince in the Fairy Tale. There is true poetry in *The Laurels and the Lady* with its amazing end. And yet his method is simple, direct, romantic. He writes of things as they really are, but his vision pierces to their significance. He can be relentless in his presentation of a poignant situation, as in *A Very Good Thing for the*

Digitized by Google

Girl, a realist of the realists if you like; but here, as everywhere in his work, are profound pity, tenderness and sympathetic knowledge of the human heart. He writes not only of things seen, but of things felt. Whatever qualities his work may have, it has the great quality essential to all artistic endeavour—sincerity.

WILLIAM J. LOCKE.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

THE MAN WHO UNDERSTOOD WOMEN

AND OTHER STORIES

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

THE MAN WHO UNDERSTOOD WOMEN

"Our bitterest remorse is not for our sins, but for our stupidities."—*Excerpt from Wendover's new novel.*

NOTHING had delighted Wendover so much when his first book appeared as some reviewer's reference to "the author's knowledge of women." He was then six or seven and twenty, and the compliment uplifted him the more because he had long regretted violently that he knew even less of women than do most young men. The thought of women fascinated him. He yearned to captivate them, to pass lightly from one love-affair to another, to have the right to call himself "blasé." Alas! a few dances in the small provincial town that he had left when he was eighteen comprised nearly all his sentimental experiences; during his years of struggle in London he had been so abominably hard up that lodging-house keepers and barmaids were almost the only women he addressed, and as his beverage was "a glass of bitter," the barmaids had been strictly commercial.

To be told that he understood women enrap-

Digitized by Google

tured him. "Instinct!" he said to himself. "Now and then a man is born who knows the feminine mind intuitively." And in his next book there was an abundance of his fanciful psychology. Denied companionship with women, he revelled in writing about them, and drew from the pages in which he posed as their delineator something of the exultation that he would have derived from being their lover. There were even pages after which he felt sated with conquest. At these times nothing accorded with his mood so well as to parade the Park and pretend to himself that the sight of the most attractive of the women bored him.

But as loneliness really cried within him pathetically, he had an adventure, culminating in marriage, with a shop assistant who glanced at him one evening in Oxford Street. After marriage they found as little of an agreeable nature to say to each other as might have been expected, so a couple of years later they separated, and the ex-shop hand went to reside with a widowed sister, who "made up ladies' own materials" at Crouch End.

Gradually he came to be accepted at his own valuation, to be pronounced one of the few gifted men from whom the feminine soul held no secrets. Then when he was close on forty, a novel

Digitized by Google

that he produced hit the popular taste, and he began to make a very respectable income.

Now, for the first time, he had opportunities for meeting the class of women that he had been writing about, and he found, to his consternation, that they failed to recognise him as an affinity after all. They were very amiable, but, like the farmer with the claret, he "never got any forrader." He perceived that his profundities were thought tedious, and that his attentions were thought raw. It was a sickening admission for an authority on women to have to make, but when he tried to flirt he felt shy.

At last he decided that all the women whom he knew were too frivolous to appeal to a man of intellect, and that their company wearied him unutterably.

But, though he had reached middle-age, he had never as yet been really in love.

In the autumn of his forty-second year—few people judged him to be so much—he removed to Paris. Some months afterwards, in the interests of a novel that he had begun, he deserted his hotel in the rue d'Antin for a pension de famille on the left bank. This establishment, which was supported chiefly by English and American girls studying art, supplied the "colour" that he need-

Digitized by Google

ed for his earlier chapters; and it was here that he made the acquaintance of Miss Searle.

Miss Searle was about six-and-twenty, bohemian and ambitious beyond her talents. Such pensions de famille abound in girls who are more or less bohemian, and ambitious beyond their talents, but Rhoda Searle was noteworthy—her face stirred the imagination, she had realised that she would never paint, and the free-and-easy intercourse of the Latin quarter had wholly unfitted her for the prim provincialism to which she must return in England.

"My father was a parson," she told Wendover once, as they smoked cigarettes together after dinner. "I had hard work to convince him that English art schools weren't the apex, but he gave in at last and let me come here. It was Paradise! My home was in Beckenhampton. Do you know it? It's one of the dreariest holes in the kingdom. I used to go over to stay with him twice a year. I was very fond of my father, but I can't tell you how terrible those visits became to me, how I had to suppress myself, and how the drab women and stupid young men used to stare at me—as if I were a strange animal, or something improper; in places like Beckenhampton they say 'Paris' in the same kind of voice that they say 'Hell.' I suppose I'm a bohemian by

Digitized by Google

instinct, for even now that I know I should never make an artist, my horror isn't so much the loss of my hopes as the loss of my freedom, my—my identity; I am never to be natural any more. After I leave here I am to go on suppressing myself till the day I die! Sometimes I shall be able to shut myself up and howl—that's all I've got to look forward to."

"What are you going to do?" asked Wendover, looking sympathetic, and thinking pleasurably that he had found a good character to put into his book.

"I am going back," she said, "a shining example of the folly of being discontented with district-visiting and Church bazaars! I go back a failure for Beckenhampton to moralise over. My old schoolmistress has asked me to stay with her while I 'look round'—you see, I've spent all my money, and I must find a situation. If the Beckenhampton parents don't regard me as too immoral, it is just possible she may employ me in the school to 'teach drawing'—unless I try to teach it. Then I suppose I shall be called a 'revolutionary' and be dismissed." She contemplated the shabby little salon thoughtfully, and lit another cigarette. "From the Boul' Mich' to a boarding school! It'll be a change. I wonder

Digitized by Google

if it will be safe to smoke there if I keep my bedroom window open wide?"

Yes, it would be as great a change as was conceivable, and Rhoda Searle was the most interesting figure in the house to Wendover. She was going to England in a month's time—there was no reason why she should not go at once, save that she had enough money to postpone the evil day—and during this valedictory month, she and he talked of their "friendship." In the tortuous streets off the boulevard, she introduced him to humble restaurants, where the dinners were sometimes amazingly good at ridiculously low prices. Together they made little excursions, and pretended to scribble or sketch in the woods —looking at each other, however, most of the time; and then at evening there was an inn to be sought, and the moon would rise sooner than the "friends"; and in the moonlight, when they returned to Paris and the pension de famille, sentiment would constrain their tones.

It was all quite innocent, but to the last degree unwise. The ex-shop assistant still throve decorously at Crouch End on his allowance, and Wendover should have seen that he was acting unfairly towards Miss Searle. To do him justice, he didn't see it—he had confided the story of his marriage to her, and it did not enter into his

Digitized by Google

thoughts that she might care for him seriously notwithstanding; his experiences had given him no cause to esteem himself dangerous, and the lover who has never received favours is, in practice, always modest, though in aspirations he may be Juanesque. The suitor of quick perceptions has been made by other women, as everybody but the least sophisticated of débutantes knows.

But if he did not dream that he might trouble the peace of Miss Searle, he was perpetually conscious that Miss Searle had disturbed his own. A month's daily companionhsip with a temperament, plus a fascinating face, would be dangerous to any man—to Wendover it was fatal. His thoughts turned no longer to liaisons with duchesses; his work, itself, was secondary to Rhoda Searle. Silly fellow as he appears, the emotions wakened in him were no less genuine than if he had combined all the noble qualities with which he invested the heroes of his books. Besides, most people would appear silly in a description which dealt only with their weaknesses. Wendover loved, and he cursed the tie that prevented his asking the girl to be his wife. How happy he might have been!

He had feared that the last evening would be a melancholy one. But it was gay—the greater part of it was gay, at any rate. As soon as the

Digitized by Google

door slammed behind them he saw that she had resolved to keep the thought of the morrow's journey in the background, to help him to turn the farewell into a fête. Her laughing caution was unnecessary; her voice, her eyes had given him the cue—her journey was to be undertaken in the distant future, life was delicious, and they were out to enjoy themselves! He had proposed dining at Armenonville—it wasn't the Paris that she had known, but champagne and fashion seemed the right thing to-night; and no fiacre had ever before sped so blithely, never had the Bois been so enchanting, and never had another girl been such joyous company. After dinner, the Ambassadeurs! The programme? They didn't listen to much of it, they were chattering all the time. It was only when the lamps died out that he heard a sigh; it was only when the lamps died out that the morning train, and the parting, and the blank beginning of the afterwards, seemed to him so horribly near.

The little salon was half dark when they reached the pension de famille, everybody else had gone to bed. Wendover turned up the light, and, though she said it was too late to sit down, they stood talking by the mantelpiece. "You've given me a heavenly memory for the end," she

Digitized by Google

told him; "thanks so much! I shall be thinking of it at this time to-morrow."

"So shall I," said Wendover.

She took off her hat, and pulled her hair right before the mirror. "Shall you?"

"Will you write to me?"

"Yes, if you'd like me to."

"I'd more than like it—I shall look forward to your letters tremendously."

"There won't be much to say in them."

"They'll be from *you*. . . . I wish you weren't going."

She raised her eyes to him. "Why?" she asked.

Wendover kept silent a moment—it was the hardest thing that he had done in his life. If he answered, "Because I love you," he felt that he would be a cad. Besides, she must know very well that he loved her—what good would it do to tell her so?—doubtless she had repented her question in the moment of putting it! Yes, he would be a cad to confess to her—she would think less of him for it. He would choose the beau rôle—and she would always remember that, when he might have spoilt their last scene together and pained her, he had been strong, heroic!

"We've been such pals," he said. That she mightn't underrate the heroism, he turned aside,

Digitized by Google

as the noble fellow in books does when he is struggling.

After a pause, she murmured blankly, "It's time I said 'good-night.'"

She went to him and gave him her hand. Her clasp was fervent—it was encouraging to feel that she was grateful! Her gaze held him, and her eyes were wide, dark, troubled; he was sure that she was sorry for him.

"Good-night, my dear," said Wendover, still as brave as the fellow in the books. And when he had watched her go up the stairs—when she had turned again, with that look in her eyes, and turned away—he went back to the salon and was wretched beyond words to tell, for a fool may love as deeply as the wisest.

This was really their "good-bye"—in the morning the claims on her were many, and he was not the only one who drove to the station with her.

When she had been gone between two and three weeks, he received the promised letter. It told him little but that she was "the new drawing mistress"; of her thoughts, her attitude towards her new life, it said nothing. He replied promptly, questioning her; but she wrote no more, and not the least of his regrets was the thought that she had dismissed him from her mind so easily.

Digitized by Google

He did not remain much longer in the boarding-house, its associations hurt him too much. A sandy-haired girl, with no eyelashes and red ears, occupied the seat that had been Rhoda's at the table, and the newcomer's unconcerned possession of it stabbed him at every meal. Having taken precautions against letters for him going astray, he returned to the hotel, and there month after month he plodded at his book, and tried to forget.

Nearly a year had gone by when he stood again on the deck of a Channel boat. He had not spared himself, and the novel was finished, and he was satisfied with it; but he was as much in love as he had been on the morning when he watched a train steam from the gare St. Lazare. As he paced the deck he thought of Rhoda all the time; it excited him that he was going to England, he might chance to see her—he might even run down to Beckenhampton for a day or two? It would make the situation harder to bear afterwards, of course, but——

He looked up "Beckenhampton" in the Railway Guide often during the next few days. The distance between them was marvellously short—the knowledge that an hour and a half's journey could yield her face to him again had a touch of the magical in it. An hour and a half from

Digitized by Google

Hades to Olympus! The longing fevered him. He threw some things into a bag pellmell one morning, and caught the 10.15.

"The George Hotel!"—and from the hotel he directed the driver to the school. The little town was grey and drear; he pitied her acutely as he gazed about him from the fly. He understood how her spirit must beat itself against the bars, he realised what her arrival must have meant to her; behind one of the windows of this prison she had sat looking back upon her yesterday! How the year must have changed her! he wondered if she still smiled. The fly jolted into the narrow High Street—and he saw her coming out of the post-office.

Yes, she still smiled—the smile that irradiated her face and made him forget everything else! They stood outside the post-office together, clasping hands once more.

"You! what are you doing here?" she cried.

"I was just going to see you, I've just come from the station. How are you? You look very well."

"I'm all right. Are you back for good?"

"Yes, I left Paris a few days ago."

"Did you stay on at the pension?"

"Oh no, I gave that up soon after you went."

Digitized by Google

"You've finished your book, eh?"

"How did you know?"

"I saw something about it in a paper. And how's Paris? I dream I'm back sometimes."

"Paris is just the same."

"I suppose you never saw anything of the others afterwards—Kitty Owen, or the MacAllister girl?"

"No, I never came across any of them—I was working very hard. Well? Tell me things; what's the news? You're still at the school then?"

"No."

"No? Aren't you? I was on my way there. What are you doing?"

"I'm married."

The blood sank from his cheeks. "Married?"

"I've been married four months."

A woman came between them to post a letter, and he was grateful for the interruption. "Let me congratulate you."

"Thanks. My husband's a solicitor here. . . . You'll come and see us?"

"I'm afraid . . . I should have been delighted, of course, but I have to be in town again this evening."

"We'd better move—we're in everybody's

Digitized by Google

way," she said. "Will you walk on with me? When does the book come out?"

"In a few weeks' time—I'll send a copy to you."

"Really? It would be very good of you. I've often looked at the book columns to see if it was published."

"Have you? I was afraid you'd forgotten all about me. . . . You—you might have written again; you promised to write!"

"I know."

"Why didn't you?"

"What was the good?"

"It would have made me happier. I missed you frightfully. I—I think that was why I left the pension, I couldn't stand it when you'd gone. . . . Well, are *you* happy?"

"Oh, I suppose so."

"I'm glad."

"So you won't come and see us?"

"It's impossible, I'm sorry to say. . . . As a matter of fact, I didn't mean to see you again at all."

"That's a pretty compliment!"

"Ah, you know what I mean—it seemed better that I shouldn't. But . . . I think I'm glad I did; I don't know! I've wondered sometimes

Digitized by Google

whether you understood. . . . We shan't meet any more, and I should like you to know——"

"Don't," she exclaimed thickly. "For heaven's sake!"

"I must," said Wendover—"I loved you dearly!"

They had walked some yards before she answered; her voice was a whisper: "What's the use of saying that to me now?" The bitterness of suffering was in the words—they flared the truth on him, the annihilating truth.

"My God!" he faltered, "would it have been any use *then?*"

Her face was colourless. She didn't speak.

"Rhoda, did you care? If—if I had asked you to stay with me, would you have stayed?"

"I don't know."

"Tell me."

"Yes, then, I *would* have stayed!" she said hoarsely. "Whom should I have hurt? I was alone, I had no one to study but myself. I wanted you to ask me. Stayed? I'd have thanked God if you had spoken! You were blind, you *wouldn't* see. And now, when it's too late, you come and say it!"

"I wanted to be straight to you," he groaned. "I sacrificed my happiness to be straight to you —it was damnably hard to do."

Digitized by Google

"I know. But I didn't want sacrifices—I wanted love. . . . Oh, it's no good our talking about it!" She stopped, and sighed. "We shall both get over it, I suppose."

"*Is* it too late?" pleaded Wendover brokenly.

"Quite. Things aren't the same; last year I was free to do as I liked. I have no conventions, but I have a conscience—there's my husband to consider now, and—and more, too. I shouldn't be contented like that to-day—I should have injured others. You and I let our chance slide, and we shall never get it back. . . . Smile, and say something about nothing—there are people who know me coming along."

And he did not sleep at the George after all; in the next train that left for Euston, a grey-faced man sat with wide eyes, cursing his own obtuseness. And he has not met her since. There is, of course, a brighter side to the history—although Rhoda is unhappy, she is happier than she would have remained with Wendover when the gilt was off the gingerbread; and though Wendover will never forget her, he cherishes her memory with more tenderness than he would have continued to cherish the girl.

But neither she nor he recognises this, and in Wendover's latest work, one may see the line

Digitized by Google

that has been quoted: "Our bitterest remorse is not for our sins, but for our stupidities."

The reception of the novel was most flattering, and as usual the author's "insight into the mind of Woman" has been pronounced "remarkable."

Digitized by Google

A VERY GOOD THING FOR THE GIRL

BAGOT told us this tale in the Stage Door Club one night. We were sitting round the fire, talking of perfect love, and somebody asked him if he had ever thought of marrying.

"Once," said the comedian cheerfully.

"Couldn't you afford it?" His talent and the remains of his good looks were worth fifty pounds a week to him then, but there had been days—well, listen to Bagot!

"It wasn't that I couldn't afford it," he said with a laugh; "actors never wait till they can afford it. I escaped in a curious way. What saved me was being such an artist. Fact! I was really smitten. If I hadn't been an artist in spite of myself I should be shivering in the last train home to Bedford Park now, instead of talking to you dear boys in an arm-chair, with a glass at my side. What? Oh, I'll tell you about it with pleasure!

"Of course, you know I made my name as the 'Rev. Simon Tibbits' in poor Pulteney's *Touch and Go*. Some things a man doesn't forget, and I remember how I felt when I settled for the part

Digitized by Google

better than I remember yesterday. You see it was my first London engagement, and I had been trying to get one in London for sixteen years. Sixteen years I had been on the road—and seen the amateurs with money sauntering on to the West End stage from their Varsity Club!

"My agent had told me to try my luck at the office over the theatre, one morning in July, and when I went in, there was nobody there but a young man who I guessed must be Pulteney. He was sitting at the table with a pencil in his hand, fiddling with a model of one of the scenes, and looking as worried as if he had been Chancellor of the Exchequer.

" 'Have I the honour of speaking to Mr. Pulteney?' said I. In those days I imagined authors were important persons.

"He flushed, and smiled—rather on the wrong side of his mouth, I thought. 'That's my name.'

" 'I was sent round to see you about the part of the clergyman in your farcical comedy, Mr. Pulteney,' I said. I had really been sent to see the stage-manager, but soft soap is never wasted, and I was always a bit of a diplomatist.

"He asked me to sit down, and we talked. He was smoking a cigarette, and I thought for a moment he was going to offer me one. I suppose it occurred to him that it wouldn't be the right

Digitized by Google

thing to ask an actor to smoke in the manager's room, for he threw his own cigarette away. He was a gentleman, poor Pulteney, though he was a deuced bad dramatist.

"The manager came bustling back soon, and began to hum and haw, but Pulteney put in a word that made it all right. I was told it was a capital part, and a big chance for me, and I skipped downstairs and out into the street, feeling as puffed-up as if I owned the Strand. As a matter of fact, the salary wasn't much—I had had better money in the provinces—but the thought of making a hit in the West End so excited me that I was nearly popping with pride.

"Great Cumberland Place! wasn't I sold when the part came. You've no idea how duffing it really was. I don't mind saying that a good many jolly fine comedians would never have got a laugh in it. When I read the jokes I could have cried. It wasn't funny as the author wrote it, dear boys, believe *me*. I don't want to brag of what I've done—I'm not the man to gas about myself—**but it was the character I put into it that made Pulteney's piece!**

"Well, the rehearsals weren't beginning for three weeks, and I kept hoping I'd see how to do something with it before the first call. I spoke the lines one way, and I spoke the lines another

Digitized by Google

way, and the more I studied the glummer I felt. I had my dinner at Exeter Hall several times and listened to the people giving their orders; it was cheap, and I thought I might hear the sort of tone I was trying to get hold of. But I didn't. On the Sunday I went to three churches and sat through three sermons. Honest Injun! And that was no use. Talk about an R.A.'s difficulty in finding the right model? I spent eight dusty days scouring London for a model for the 'Rev. Simon Tibbits'!

"Then one afternoon I had come out of Prossers' Avenue. As it happened I wasn't thinking shop; I wasn't thinking about anything in particular; and all of a sudden I heard a voice. *A* voice? I heard *the* voice. I heard the voice I needed for the part!

"I jumped. My heart was in my throat. There, smiling up at a six-foot constable, was a little parson asking the way to Baker Street. He looked like an elderly cherub, with his pink cheeks, and his innocent, inquiring eyes. I held my breath in the hope he would go on talking, but the policeman had answered him, and he tripped along with merely a 'Thank you.' He tripped along with the oddest walk I have ever seen; and I dodged after him, never taking my

Digitized by Google

gaze off his legs and studying them all the way to Charing Cross.

"As I expected, he was going by bus. There was one just moving. Up went his umbrella; and the next moment I was on the step, too, intending to lure him into conversation as soon as I could, and master his voice as nicely as I was mastering his legs.

" 'Full inside,' said the conductor, putting his dirty hand before my face. I was so annoyed I could have punched his head!

"Well, there was nothing for it but to go on top and wait for someone to get out. Hang it, nobody did get out; and I saw no more of my little model till we reached Baker Street. I meant to let him walk a few yards, and then ask him to direct me to Lord's, but there was a surprise for me; he tripped across the road into the station. 'Oho,' I said to myself, 'training it? So much the better! We're going to have a comfortable chat together, after all, you and I!'

"I kept as close to him when he took his ticket as if I'd designs on his watch, and I heard him say, 'Third class to Rickmansworth, if you please.' This was rather awkward—I didn't want to pay a long fare, and I didn't know the line well; *I* had to book as far as Rickmansworth, too. When we got round to the platform the

Digitized by Google

train was there, and he hovered up and down for five minutes or more, looking for a seat to suit him; I began to think we'd both be left behind. Then just as they were slamming the doors, he made up his mind. In he went, and I after him, and—what do you think? We were both on the same side of the compartment, with a fat woman and a soldier between us!

"Two passengers between us, I give you my word, and no room opposite. Not only I couldn't talk to him—I couldn't even see him. Every time we drew into a station I prayed the compartment would thin a bit; I sat tense, watching the faces. Not a sign on them! You've heard of the American rustic who got so exasperated standing up in a crowded car, that at last he shouted, 'Say! ain't none o' you people got homes?' That was how *I* felt."

Bagot's imitation of the rustic was very good, and we signified our appreciation in the usual way. When the laugh was over someone told the waiter we were thirsty, and the story-teller filled his pipe.

"Well," he resumed, puffing, "to cut a long journey short, we reached Rickmansworth without my having had a glimpse of my gentleman. I was about desperate now. He hadn't taken a dozen steps when I overtook him, and asked if

Digitized by Google

he would be kind enough to inform me whether any decent apartments were to be had in the village. It didn't seem worth while to have had all this bother just to hear him speak again for ten seconds, and I was wishing myself back in my apartments in Kennington. I said the first thing that came into my head.

"It turned out to be the best question I could have put.

"I am a visitor myself," he said, beaming at me, "but I believe there are rooms to be had in Cornstalk Terrace. Yes, I am almost positive I noticed a card in a window as I passed through the street this morning."

"I stood simply lapping his voice up.

" 'Is it difficult for a stranger to find?' I asked.

" 'No, indeed,' he said, 'it is quite near. But I am going there; if you care to accompany me——'

" 'Oh, you're too good!' I exclaimed, and upon my word I could have hugged him!

"The road was a great deal nearer than I wanted it to be, for he was chirruping to me beautifully, and I hated to part from him. When we arrived I effervesced with gratitude, and he hoped I'd find comfortable quarters; and then I went straight back to the station—and heard that I had just missed a train! Pleasant? Rick-

Digitized by Google

mansworth isn't the sprightliest place I've ever waited in either. I had some nourishment in the bar of the hotel across the way, and I examined the High Street. It wasn't extensive. The barmaid had told me there was a park close by, so I started to discover it. I wasn't keen on the park, you understand, but I thought it would be a nice quiet spot to rehearse in and see if I had caught the little cleric's voice. As I was going along, past a row of villas, blest if I didn't come across him again, standing at his gate!

"He supposed I had been hunting for lodgings all the time, so, of course, I had to keep the game up. He was a friendly old chap and, honour bright, I felt sorry to think I was going to turn him into ridicule on the stage. Still he would never know, and actors can't be choosers. He went inside to ask his landlady if she could recommend any diggings to me; and a minute afterwards, out he fluttered to say he had quite forgotten there would be a couple of rooms vacant in that very house next day. Christopher Columbus! I had had no more idea of taking rooms than I had of taking the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. But it was too gigantic a chance to miss. I fixed the matter with the old woman there and then—and the next morning my model and I were living under the same roof! . . . Pass the

Digitized by Google

matches, one of you fellows, my pipe's out. . . .

"At the back of the house there were some lettuces and a clothes-prop that were called a 'garden.' My parlour was at the back, too; and after dinner I saw the rector airing himself. By now I had learnt he was a rector. I lost no time in joining him, you may be sure—I wasn't paying two rents to go to sleep on the sofa—and we discussed politics and public libraries. It was a bit heavy for me, but I didn't worry much what he talked about so long as I could hear his dulcet tones. I ought to have said there was a bench against the clothes-prop; so far as her means permitted, the old woman did things handsomely.

"There was a bench, and we sat down on it; and while we were sitting there, the door opened —and out into the sunshine there came a young and beautiful girl. She wore a white cotton frock, and there was no paint or powder on her face, and she had the kind of eyes that make you want to say your prayers and be good. I'm not going to gush—I'm holding myself in—but on my honour she was just the saintliest picture of English maidenhood ever seen in a poet's dream!

" 'My daughter,' said my model.

"I was so staggered that I bowed like a super at a bob a night.

"Yes, the old woman did things handsomely—

Digitized by Google

there was room for three on the bench. She sat by me, turning a backyard into paradise—I mean the girl, not the old woman—and I forgot to study her father for half an hour. I heard where his living was, and why they were taking a holiday, and I stammered that I was an actor, and was afraid they'd be shocked. I was stupid to own it, though it was all right and they didn't mind; but there was something in that girl's eyes that forced the truth from you in spite of yourself. I had been going to say I was in the City, but the lie stuck.

"There's some fine country round Rickmansworth—'Ricky,' the natives call it—and we used to explore, the three of us. We'd go to Chorley Wood, and to Chenies—what a good back cloth Chenies would make! By the end of the week we were together nearly all the day. They invited me into their room to supper, and after supper Marion would sing at a decrepit piano. The meals were quite plain, you know—sometimes we'd pick the green stuff in the garden ourselves—but, boys, the peace of that little village room in the lamplight! The minister and his child—the simple, God-fearing man and that girl with her deep, grave eyes, and earnest voice. Their devotion to each other, the homeliness of it all! To me, a touring player, it was sweet, it was

Digitized by Google

wonderful, to be welcomed in an atmosphere of home.

"If the comedy had been put into rehearsal on the date arranged it would have been better for me. But it wasn't—the rehearsals were postponed—and soon I was thinking much more of Marion than of my part. I used to talk to her of—well, of things I had never talked of to anyone except my mother when I was a kid. Somehow I didn't feel ashamed to talk of them to that girl. She took me out of myself. She raised me up. The footlights were forgotten.

"Oh, I had no right to think of her in the way I did, of course! What could I hope for? There was a world between us, and I saw it. I told myself that I had done all I came to do, and that I ought to go back to town at once! I told myself I was mad to stay there. But I knew I loved her. I loved her as I have never loved a woman since—and there were moments when I thought that *she* was fond of *me*."

Bagot, it was rapidly becoming evident to us, had forgotten that he had prefaced the story by congratulating himself on not having married the girl. His voice trembled. We saw that, carried away by his own intensity as a narrator, he was beginning to believe he was a blighted being.

Digitized by Google

But we looked sympathetic, and let him work it up.

"One day she owned she cared for me," he continued, with a far-away air. "It was the day before they were going home, and we were talking of our 'friendship.' Somehow I—I lost my head, and she was crying in my arms.

"I asked her to marry me. I swore she should never repent it. She sat listening to me with her hands limp in her lap, and a look on her face that I shall see till I die. She was afraid—not of me, but that her father wouldn't consent. They had no violent prejudice against the theatre, but she had never been to one in her life; for her to marry an actor seemed an impossible thing.

"I went to him right off. I told him I worshipped her; I implored him to trust her to me. It was an awful shock to him; I don't believe he had had a suspicion of the state of affairs—he reproached himself for letting it come about. But he was very gentle. He said he had hoped for a far different future for her, still that all he wanted was for his child to be happy; he said he couldn't stand in her way if he knew she was really sure of herself. In the end he promised she should marry me if she wanted to in three years' time.

"When I parted from her we considered we

Digitized by Google

were engaged; and in the evening, after they left, I went to town.

"I went to town, and there was a call for the first rehearsal of *Touch and Go*. I had forgotten business, I had forgotten everything but Marion. That call paralysed me. I saw what I had done, I realised the situation. The girl I was to marry reverenced her father—and I meant to burlesque him on the stage!

"I couldn't do it, I wouldn't! How could I think of it now? It wasn't that I feared their finding it out—as I tell you, they weren't playgoers, and their home was a good way off besides—it was the heartlessness of the thing that frightened me. To make myself up as her father? To speak the bland, hypocritical lines of the part in her father's voice, to mimic him, to turn him into ridicule to amuse a crowd. I say how could I do it?

"All the same it was precious difficult to avoid, for I had studied him so long. But I went to the show box the first day and rehearsed as I had expected to rehearse before I met him. Perhaps not so well; it was a strain *not* to be like him after all my study, and it made me pretty rotten. I rehearsed so the first day, and for three or four days, and presently I began to notice that the Management was a bit unhappy, and that Pul-

Digitized by Google

teney nearly twisted his moustache out during my scenes. If an author has written a bad part, trust him to blame the actor! He button-holed me at last, and begged me 'to put a little more character into it.' And I tried to. But I knew it was a failure, for I could only see one character all the time—and that one I wouldn't touch.

"When I was in the stalls once, he and the manager sat down and put their heads together. It was dark in front, and they hadn't seen me as they came round. I heard them say something about 'a pity they hadn't a West End actor for the part.' I knew they were talking of *my* part, and it got my dander up; I knew I could act any of that West End hoity-toity company off the stage; I knew I had only to let myself go.

"When I went on again I determined I'd show 'em what I could do; I determined I'd show 'em they had a better comedian than any forty-pound -a-weeker. I sent them into fits. 'Hallo!' they said. The women in the wings stopped talking about their dresses to watch me. The highly connected amateurs from Oxford and Cambridge began to give at the knees, and I could hear the leading man's heart drop on to the boards; the actor from the provinces was wiping them out! That rehearsal was the sweetest triumph of my life.

Digitized by Google

"She'd never know—she'd never know! I kept telling myself she couldn't hear of it. By the time the wig that I ordered was tried on I felt as sure of success as I was of my lines! I was soaked in the part. I wasn't *acting* the little rector—by George, I *was* the little rector, trip, face and chirrup. And the first night came, and I was to play in London at last!

"They told me the house was crammed. All the swell critics were there, all the fashionable first-nighters. I was so nervous that the wig-paste shook in my hands when I made up, but I was ready much too soon.

"I went downstairs and waited. The door-keeper gave me a note. Of all the——! It was from Marion. A friend had brought her up to see me, and she was in the theatre. I was stunned, I thought I was going to fall. *You* know—every man in this room knows—that for an actor to remodel his performance at the last minute would be a miracle. I couldn't do it, it wasn't in my power; but even then I thought I'd try. I said I *must try,* though it would ruin me! And I heard my cue.

"My first lines went for nothing. I floundered—the audience were ice; I saw the people on the stage looking at me aghast. Then suddenly I got a laugh: a gesture, an intonation, some-

Digitized by Google

thing I had been trying to hold back, had escaped me. The laugh went to my head—I made them laugh again! I said I'd explain to Marion —that she'd understand, that she'd forgive me—and even while I said it, my other self, the 'self' that wasn't acting, knew it was a lie and I was losing her.

"I couldn't help it—the laughter made me drunk; I did it all! I knew the disgust she must be feeling, but the audience were roaring at me now; I felt the shame that she was suffering with my own heart, but the artist in me swept me on. The manager panted at me in the wings: 'You're great—you're immense. Gad! you're making the hit of the piece!' The stalls were in convulsions, the gallery had got my name. *'Bagot!'* they were shouting—after each act, *'Bagot!'* Pulteney rushed to me with blessings at the end. The house thundered for me. It was London! I knew that I was 'made'! But across the flare of grinning faces, I seemed to see the Angel I had lost and the horror in her eyes."

Bagot bowed his head; his pipe had fallen, tears dripped down his cheeks. By this time he was quite sure he had been mourning for her ever since beside a lonely hearth.

"She wrote to me next day, breaking it off,"

Digitized by Google

he groaned. "She wouldn't listen to reason; she said it 'might be art, but it wasn't love.' "

"Did you ever see her afterwards?" we asked.

"Once," he said, "years later. She married some County chap, with an estate and all that. I saw her driving with her little boy. She looked very happy I thought. Women soon forget." After a pause he added bitterly: "If one of you fellows"—he glanced at the only author in the group—"cares to write the true tragedy of a man's life, there it is. You might call it 'The Price of Success.' "

But we all thought a more appropriate title would be the one that I have used.

Digitized by Google

THE WOMAN WHO WISHED TO DIE

My meeting with Mr. Peters was so momentous that I can't resist mentioning it was due to someone I had never seen—to a trifle; I can't resist referring to my own affairs for a moment. I was supposed to be at work on a novel, and I had a mind as fertile as mashed potato. One day in August I tumbled a receipt out of a desk, and saw that the lady to whom I sent my stories to be typewritten had had nothing from me to typewrite for two months. The discovery dismayed me. I was ashamed to realise how slowly I was getting on, and resolved to try a change of surroundings. My trip altered the course of lives—and I shouldn't have made it but for the reproach of a stranger's receipt.

I decided upon Ostend, by way of Antwerp, where I wanted to see the pictures; also I meant to visit Brussels, where I wanted to see my prettiest cousin. And in Antwerp—behold Mr. Peters! As I was wandering through the gallery, an American asked me if I could tell him in which of the rooms he would find "The Last Communion of St. Francis of Assisi." Having just been

Digitized by Google

directed to it myself—just been startled by the faultless fluency of an official's English—I had the information pat, and the American and I proceeded to the room together.

I remember feeling it incumbent on me to be pained by the first words he spoke in front of the picture.

"I am told," he remarked, "that Rubens sold this work for sixty pounds, English money, and that forty thousand pounds were subsequently paid for it. Rough on Rubens!"

I affected the tone of the Superior Person. "You would see it better if you stood further away," I said; "what do you think of the painting?"

"Of the painting," he answered, "I am no judge, but the way the value of that property has risen just astonishes me."

I did not think I should like him, but I began to like him surprisingly soon. He was a sad-faced, middle-aged man, with a simple manner that was wonderfully winning. In less than five minutes I was humiliated that I had sneered at him in front of "St. Francis of Assisi." By what right, how much did I understand of it myself? My attitude had been nine-tenths pose. This man was genuine; he spoke of what he found interesting. And he proved anything but a fool.

Digitized by Google

We went down the steps of the Musée des Beaux Arts side by side, and strolled through the hot streets, among the swarm of ragged Flemish children—there are more ragged children to the square yard in Antwerp than in Westbourne Park—to the quarter of the hotels. It turned out that we were staying at the same one, he on the first floor and I on the fifth, and after dinner we drifted together to the place Verte, and talked there under the trees while the band played.

He told me that he had not been to Europe before, and I discerned that he was a lonely man persevering with the effort to enjoy himself.

"The fact is," he said, handing me his cigar-case, "I ought to have made the trip some years ago.—Won't you try a cigar, sir?—There's nothing the matter with Europe, but I guess I'm not quite so keen on sight-seeing as I was. When I was a lad I was dead-stuck on coming over, but I hadn't the dollars then. I promised myself to have a good time when I was thirty, and I hustled. When I was thirty I had made a few dollars, but I saw no chance of the good time—I was still hustling. One afternoon it occurred to me that I was forty. It displeased me *some;* seemed to me that good time was never coming. At the start I had aimed to be the boss of a business, but now the business had got so big it was

Digitized by Google

bossing me. 'Well,' I said, 'you have made your pile, and you have nobody to spend it on but yourself; next year you shall quit, and have that good time you have been working for so long.' But it didn't come off. The business went on swelling, and I went on saying, 'Next year.' And before I knew where I was I was fifty, and"—his voice dropped a little—"and I have never had the good time yet."

He was leaving for Ostend the next morning, and, when we parted, I was sorry he wasn't to remain in Antwerp till the end of the week like myself. However, at Ostend I expected we should meet again, for I did not mean to stay long in Brussels. It is a beautiful city, and many of us would admire it much more if it did not set us yearning for Paris. The resemblance is striking, but the fascination is absent. To go to Brussels is like calling on the sister of the woman one is in love with. Brussels is Paris provincialised; one realises it before one has sat outside a café for an hour and watched the types go by. Literally it is provincialised in August, when most of the theatres are closed, and the streets are peopled by excursionists. I had intended to stay three of four days at most, but duty to my relatives kept me with them for ten or twelve, and at

Digitized by Google

last when I did reach Ostend I had almost forgotten Mr. Peters.

The thought of him recurred to me as I made my way towards the Kursaal on the first evening, and I wondered if he was still here. It was eight o'clock, and now that the glare of sun upon the blistered Digue had faded, and the radiance of electricity had risen in its stead, the town was looking its best. Ostend was still dining. The long continuous line of hotel windows fronting the sea was brilliant. Window after window, wide, curtainless, and open to the view. A frontage of gleaming tables and coloured candle-shades—a dazzling frontage of flowers, and faces, and women's jewelled necks and arms.

In the Kursaal the orchestra was playing "L'Amico Fritz." I had listened to the music for perhaps half an hour when I saw Mr. Peters. He was with a friend, and he passed without observing me. They sat down a short distance off and I noticed that he was talking with much animation to her, with much more animation than he had shown with me. Indeed, I think that was what I noticed first of all—the unexpected animation of Mr. Peters.

But the next instant I was engrossed by his companion. She was not youthful; I didn't consider her pretty; her dress, rich as it was, ap-

Digitized by Google

peared to me a dowdy sort of thing among the elaborate toilettes around us. Then what engrossed me? Well, it was the expression that she wore. I am trying to find the word. "Pleasure," of course—but that says nothing. As nearly as I can explain, it was the wonder in her look. The "wonder," that is it! There were crow's-feet about her eyes, and her gaze shone with a young girl's wonder.

Evidently the interest in the conversation was mutual, and I assumed that they had known each other in the States. Then a second time they passed me, and I heard her speak, and she had no trace of the American accent. It began to seem to me that Mr. Peters had been losing no time at Ostend.

I saw him with her again on the morrow, and on the next day, but two or three days went by before I saw him alone. When we did have a chat, I couldn't withstand the temptation to allude to her.

"You're in better spirits," I said; "have you come across anybody from the 'other side' to cheer you up?"

A suspicion of a smile flickered across his thin, shrewd lips.

"No," he drawled; "no, I have met no acquaintances in Europe yet, but——" He hand-

Digitized by Google

ed his cigar-case to me: "Won't you try a cigar, sir?—but I am getting along."

I used to wish he would present me to her, but he never did. Constantly those two figures sat together in the Kursaal. In the concert-room, or on the terrace, if I found the little woman I found Mr. Peters. Never to my knowledge did she speak to anybody else. And always the girlishness of her gaze held and mystified me—always, that is to say, until the end was approaching.

Of course, I didn't know that it threatened the end then, but I couldn't fail to preceive the difference. The curiosity she had inspired in me was so strong, I had watched her so intently for nearly a fortnight—oh, it may sound vulgar; I don't defend myself—that the first time I glanced across at her face and saw trouble there I was sensible of a distinct shock. And in the next few days I said it was heavy trouble. It was as if the blaze within her were dwindling, as if it were dying out, and leaving her cold and grey. I said—it is a great word, but once I said the look on her face was "terror."

I did not attach any importance to the fact that Mr. Peters was sitting alone on the terrace when I went to the Kursaal one evening, because I supposed that he was waiting there for her to

Digitized by Google

come in; it was when I found him alone in the same place much later that I was surprised. You know how you understand sometimes, without a gesture, that a man wants you to sit down by him, but doesn't want you to speak; I knew that Mr. Peters wanted me to sit down by him, and didn't want me to speak. I think we must have sat looking at the track of moonlight on the sea for a quarter of an hour before either of us said a word.

Then he remarked drily, "My friend has gone."

"You must miss her," I responded.

He mused again, and handed his cigar-case to me with his usual question. I said I would have a cigarette.

"You found me dumfounded," he resumed, puffing his cigar deliberately, "by the most singular occurrence I have heard of in my life; I am beginning to get my breath back. You may have noticed the lady?"

I said that I had.

"I guess that you assume her to be a wealthy woman?"

I said that I did.

"Well, sir, she is about as poor as they make them. I have lived too long to be extravagant with emotions, but that little lady's history has

Digitized by Google

just broken me up. As a writer you may find it worth your attention. It was because she had always been solitary; that was what started the trouble—her loneliness. It's an awful thing to conjecture how many poor little women in London are breaking their hearts with loneliness. Never a companion she had, never a pleasure. Mornings she walked to her employment; evenings she walked back to where she lodged. She was a girl of eighteen then, and she walked cheerfully. And she was cheerful when she was twenty, and twenty-five, and thirty—always keeping her pluck up with the thought of something brighter ahead, you know; always hoping, like me, for that 'good time.'"

"Go on," I said.

"When she had been clerking years, and doing home work in her leisure, she had put a small sum by. But she was frightened to touch it—there was the growing fear of the lonely woman that one day she might take sick and need that money. And the 'good time' didn't come. And her youth went out of her, and lines began to creep about her eyes and mouth—she looked in the glass and saw them—and she didn't walk to and from quite so bravely now. Twenty years odd she had had of drudgery, and the hopefulness was dying in her. She was just faint with longing, sir. She

Digitized by Google

wanted to put on pretty things before she was old —she was starving for a taste of the sweets that she was meant for."

He blew a circlet of smoke into the air, and watched it.

"That stage passed. Seemed to the woman, as time dragged on, that she hadn't the energy left to long for anything. She was tired. When she lay down to sleep she wasn't particularly keen on waking up any more. As I see the matter, it was by no means the work that had done the damage—it was the dullness. It was the emptiness of her life, the forlornness of it. By-and-by she had to go to a doctor, and he talked about 'depression' and 'melancholia.' He said what she ought to do was to live with friends—she was about as friendless as Robinson Crusoe before Friday turned up—he recommended her to seek 'gay society'! She said she was 'much obliged,' and went back to her lodging, and sat staring from the window at the strangers passing in the twilight. I don't know whether you have struck a case of melancholia? A man I was fond of was taken that way in Buffalo. Out of business he would sit brooding by the hour, with his eyes wide, and never saying a word. I stayed talking to him once half the night, persuading him to put a change of linen in his grip and start

Digitized by Google

for Europe in the morning; I told him it would do him good to hustle round the stores, buying most things he needed to put on, after he arrived. I guess my arguments weren't so excellent as my intentions—when I went down town after breakfast I heard he had shot himself. Melancholia's likely to be serious. . . . No, the doctor's advice wasn't much use to the little woman. Her walk to the office lay across some bridge. One evening, as she was crossing it, the thought came that it would be sweet if she were lying in the river and heard the water singing in her ears. Then she tore herself away because she had turned giddy. Every morning and evening she had to cross that bridge, you understand me. Every morning and evening that thought pulled at her, and she stopped by the parapet and looked down."

In the pause he made, the music from the concert-room was painfully distinct. They were playing the "Invitation to the Valse."

"Well, just as with the friend I lost in Buffalo," he went on quietly, "while she did her work like a machine all day, she was proposing to die. She had grown so woeful tired that it was a relief to her to think of dying. . . . You will smile at what I am going to say. One afternoon she saw an ordinary picture advertisement stuck on

Digitized by Google

a wall—a picture of a Continental resort, with fashionable ladies parading on the Digue. She told me that—with the thought of death great in her mind—she stood right there in the London street, looking at it; and, sir, her regret was that she was going out of the world without once having worn a pretty frock, or bought a handful of roses in December! You may laugh at the idea of a commonplace poster influencing a woman at such a time?"

"I am not laughing," I said.

"She harped on that grievance of hers till some of the interests of her girlhood stirred in her again. The enthusiasm had gone, but she was wistful. And she'd sit thinking. She'd sit looking at her savings-book—all she had to show for her life. She figured out that she might break away from her employment and have luxury for a month. When the month was up she'd be destitute, but that didn't matter because, you see, she was quite prepared to go to sleep in the Thames. That little drudge, in that little stuffy lodging, took a notion to escape for once into the sunshine; she asked herself why she shouldn't live for a month—before she died! . . . .

"She was timid when she went to buy the showy frocks; she touched the daintiest of them lovingly, but she was shy to choose them for her

Digitized by Google

self. She felt that she had entered the store too late to wear the things she had hankered for so long. She came here the day after I arrived. She appeared a sad little body, sitting next to me at table; perhaps that was why I took to her so; but now it just amazes me to think of the way she livened up when we had grown friends. I have heard her laugh, sir! I have heard her laugh quite happily, though her cash was melting like an ice-cream in an oven; though she had come to tremble each time she changed a gold piece; though she had come to shudder at each sunset that brought her nearer to the End. It was only this afternoon that she told me the circumstances! I had seen she had anxiety, and I—asked questions. I looked to meet her again this evening, but I got a letter instead to say I should never meet her any more. When they handed me her letter she had—gone."

"You don't mean she—she's dead?" I whispered.

"Not yet," he said. "She wrote that our friendship had helped her some; she wrote that she was going back to her old lodging, and would struggle on. But she resigned her position, and she has changed her last bank-note—how long do you surmise that she will have the heart to struggle?"

Digitized by Google

He lit another cigar; and among the jewelled, exotic crowd we stared absently over the rail at the humble flock of weary trippers who lacked the shillings to come in. One may do worse than cross to Ostend merely to stand by that slender rail and watch the two worlds that it divides.

At last I said: "She must have liked you very much: her feelings for you made her want to live —and then, to remain here with you, she squandered the money that she needed to keep her alive!"

"It makes me feel good to hear you say so," he returned. "It is not encouraging that she has disappeared, knowing that she had never mentioned even the quarter where she lodged; but it would be the proudest moment of my life if that little lady would consent to marry me. When we get up we shall say 'Good-bye'—I am starting for London right away."

"Without a clue to her address?"

"Yes, *sir*, without a notion. I don't know where she lodged, and I don't know where she worked, and London's a mighty big city; but I estimate there are about two sovereigns between that woman and the river, and I have to find her before they're gone."

In his glance I saw the grit that had built his fortune. I tried to be hopeful.

Digitized by Google

"If she's hunting for a situation she'll look at the newspapers," I said.

"She will look at the columns that interest her," he answered, "but I mayn't advertise on every page."

"You can pay for inquiries."

"You may bet I'll pay; all that worries me is that inquiries go slow."

"I suppose you don't know which bridge it is she crosses every day?"

"We can build no hopes on the bridge," he replied; "I did not interrogate her—I did not suspect it was to be our last meeting."

"She may struggle longer than you think; she may be brave."

"You mean it kindly," he said, "but you have heard her history! I opine that I've got to discover that address within a week—I am racing against time. There's just this in my favour, she has a name to be noticed. She's called 'Joanna Faed,' and I guess there can't be many women called that, even in a city the size of London."

"What an extraordinary thing!" I faltered. "I can give you 'Joanna Faed's' address on half a hundred receipts. Why, she must be the lady who typewrites my stories for me!"

Digitized by Google

FRANKENSTEIN II

I WAS at the Throne Theatre to see Orlando Lightfoot's comedy. Entering the buffet, in the first interval, I met Orlando Lightfoot.

"Hallo, old man!" I said. "Congratulations in large quantities."

"Thanks," said the new dramatist. "Have you seen it before?"

"No; but I saw in the papers that it was an 'emphatic success.' How beautiful Elsie Millar is in the part!"

We induced one of the personages behind the bar to notice that we were present, and removed our glasses to a table. Orlando sighed heavily.

"What's your trouble?" I inquired.

"My 'emphatic success,'" he said. "But it's too long a tale to tell you now—I suppose you want to see the second act?"

The vindictiveness with which he pronounced the last two words was startling. I stared at him. "My dear Orlando——" I began, but he cut me short.

"Call me 'Frankenstein'!" he groaned. "Like Frankenstein, I've constructed a monster that's

Digitized by Google

destroying me. Before I created this accursed comedy I was a happy man."

"It must have been a very long while before," I said. "When I had the misfortune to share your rooms, you used to remark casually at breakfast that you wished you were dead."

"Anyone is liable to express dissatisfaction in moments; but on the whole I was cheerful and buoyant, especially when you were out," he insisted. "I frequently had as much as five pounds at the time. I'm not boasting; you know it's true. Five pounds at the time is prosperity, if a fellow hasn't got a monster to support. Since I wrote the comedy, a five-pound note has been as ephemeral as a postage stamp. I pinched and pawned to start the monster in life. What it cost me in typewriting alone would have kept me for a month. It has gorged gold. It has devoured my All. And now, by a culminating stroke of diabolical malice, it's breaking my heart."

"There's nearly a quarter of an hour before the act," I said. "Give me a cigarette and the story—I want one badly; an appreciative editor is eager to send a cheque."

"Halves?" asked the author of the "emphatic success."

"Halves," I agreed.

Digitized by Google

"Well," said Orlando, "the devil tempted me in the pit of the Vaudeville one night. Elsie Millar was in the cast; she had very little to do, but, as usual, she did it exquisitely. I had always admired her, wished I knew her, and that night I thought, 'By Jove, wouldn't I like to write a big part for her! Wouldn't she make a hit if she only got the chance!' I came out after the performance imagining her in the sort of part she's playing in the monster. A plot was beginning to put its head round the corner, and I wandered out of the Strand on to the Embankment trying to get hold of it. The Embankment was deserted, and the river——"

"Yes," I said. "Cut that kind of thing—I can put it in when I do the writing. I don't want to miss any of the second act."

"Well, I went to bed about three o'clock with a plot that enraptured me. When I woke up and saw it in the daylight, it didn't look quite so fetching—as is the way of plots et cetera; still, it had good features, if it wasn't a Venus, and I curled its hair, and titivated it generally, till it was fascinating again. The dialogue was the most interesting work—especially the love scene; I enjoyed that. It was like making love to a nice girl myself, and saying the right things at the time instead of thinking of 'em afterwards. I

Digitized by Google

ought to have been turning out stuff for the papers, but I let them slide, and at last the play was finished. It sounds as rapid as filling your pipe, told like this; when you do the story you should stress the alternate ups and downs of the business: the nights when I wrote epigrams and felt like Pinero, and the mornings when I read 'em and felt like cutting my throat. Don't forget that. It's real."

"I'll remember," I said. "I'll have a paragraph on it."

"Well, I had two copies of the thing typewritten at Miss Beck's, in Rupert Street; and pretty they were, tied up with pink bows—till I put in all the improvements I had thought of after I posted to her. The improvements I had thought of after I posted to her made such a mess of the copies that I had to have two more typewritten. However, I couldn't pretend she was dear, and I paid and looked pleasant. Guilelessly, I imagined my expenses were over.

"Sonny, they were just beginning! Miss Beck's bill was only the preface. A man who knew the ropes told me I should be a fool to have the scrip hawked about before it had been copyrighted. 'How do you do it?' I said. 'Oh,' he said, 'it's very easy. You give a private performance of the piece in a building licensed for public

Digitized by Google

entertainments. There are a few details to be observed.' When I grasped the details I knew I had committed a reckless extravagance in writing a play. I examined my belongings, and doubted if they would run to luxuries like this. Still I had constructed the monster, and it had its claims. I did my duty by it.

"I hired a hall in Walthamstow for an afternoon. I invented two columns of Fashions for Men to pay for the hall in Walthamstow. Whipping a tired brain, I invented them—and then they fetched eighteenpence short of the rent. I posted one of the nice, clean copies of the monster to the Lord Chamberlain to read. *I* didn't want him to read it—especially since I had learnt the compliment was to cost me guineas—but that was one of the 'details to be observed.' I had to pawn my watch for the Lord Chamberlain. And he didn't even send the nice clean copy back—he buried it in archives. More typewriting expenses! After that I had to have the parts typewritten. My dress clothes paid for the parts. Then I had to advertise for artists to read them. I got my 'artists' cheap—a half-crown a head, but my watch-chain went after my watch, and the monster began to attack my library. 'Any more "details"?' I asked. 'One or two,' said the man; 'you must have a couple of playbills print-

Digitized by Google

ed, and don't forget to register your title.' Well, I won't dwell on the drinks, but by the time I was through with the Walthamstow hall, and Stationers' Hall, the monster had left nothing in my wardrobe except a mackintosh, and had consumed a complete set of Thackeray bound in calf!"

Orlando groaned again, and I murmured sympathy. I also reminded him that the second act must be drawing near.

"All right!" he said testily. "Listen. The monster was now my legal property—it was about the only property I did have now, but anyhow, the monster was mine. I was informed that an official licence for it would reach me in due course. Admire my next move! An average intellect might have been shattered by the sacrifices I had made for the beast; *I* was still brilliant. Did I send the thing to a theatre uninvited and wait six months to see it expelled? Not Orlando! I realised that I was an outsider. I realised that I needed someone to take me in. Elsie Millar was playing at the St. James's then. She had never heard of me, but I wrote to her; I said I had written a comedy with her in my mind, and that I'd like her to read it before I offered it to a management."

"What for?"

Digitized by Google

"'What for'? Because I thought she might be so enamoured of her part that she'd move mountains to get the piece produced."

"My prolix friend," I said, "I perfectly understand your inward reason; but what was the reason you gave to the lady?"

"Oh!" said Orlando, "I borrowed from a letter that I once knew an actress receive from a full-blown dramatist; I wrote that I was 'desirous of hearing whether she would care to play the part if an opportunity arose.' Suggestive?"

"For an amateur who had never been through a stage-door it was consummate impudence," I admitted. "And she replied?"

"She replied that she would be pleased to read the piece if I sent it to her private address. It departed to her, registered, the same day. And I wish you wouldn't keep interrupting me! . . . Well, a fortnight went by, a fortnight of suspense that I can't describe to you."

"I don't want you to describe it!" I exclaimed. "For heaven's sake, remember that the act'll be starting directly. *I'll* describe your feelings when I write the story."

"If you don't write it better than you listen to it, there's a poor show of a cheque," he complained. "I say a fortnight went by. Then she

Digitized by Google

wrote that she had read my comedy and was 'delighted with it.' Look here! if you don't undertake not to speak another word till I've finished, I shan't tell you any more. Is it understood?"

I nodded. And for a spell Orlando had it all his own way.

"She wrote that she was 'delighted with it,' and asked me to call on her one day about half-past four. I could hardly believe my eyes. Really, it looked as if the monster's rancour had worn itself out. I felt tender towards the beast again, my affection revived. I said that it was like a monster in a fairy tale, transformed to a benevolent presence by the heroine. I thought that a pretty idea; I hoped I should get a chance to mention it to Miss Millar when I went.

"Of course, I meant to go the next afternoon—weather permitting—and I was so eager to see what sort of weather it was in the morning that I trembled when I pulled up the blind. Thank Heaven! it was raining. I breakfasted gratefully, and my only fear was that the sun might come out later on. Fortunately it didn't. The drizzle continued, and all was well. By your idiotic expression it's evident you've forgotten that the only decent garment remaining to me was a mackintosh. My suit was socially im-

Digitized by Google

possible; if it had been a fine day I couldn't have gone.

"She lives with her mother in a top flat in Chelsea. When I was shown in, she was alone. Her voice was just as sweet as it was on the stage. She isn't a bit like any other actress I've met; she talks rather slowly, and she's very quiet. Even when she enthused about the piece she spoke quietly.

" 'I think it's beautiful,' she said. 'I'm glad I asked you to let me read it. I nearly didn't, because——'

" 'Because you didn't know my name?' I said.

" 'Well, yes,' she said. 'So many people write to one, and their pieces are generally so impossible. Is this your first, Mr. Lightfoot?'

" 'My first, and it has threatened to be my last,' I said. 'I've been copyrighting it, and the complications have nearly ruined me. I had begun to feel myself another Frankenstein with a monster—and then you turned the monster into a prince of light, like Beauty in the fairy tale.'

"It didn't 'go' so well as I had expected, but she smiled a little. 'You'll let me give you some tea?' she said. 'Won't you take off your mackintosh?'

" 'No, thanks,' I said; 'it isn't very wet.'

"Then we had tea and cake, and got a bit for-

Digitized by Google

rader. She said she wished she had a theatre to produce the thing, and *I* said I wished I had an agent to place it for me. She asked me if I'd like her to show it to Alexander, and *I* said the English language would be inadequate to express the gratitude I'd feel. Of course, I added, she mustn't do all that for nothing, and *she* said she'd find it reward enough to play the part. I said 'Pickles!' then, quite naturally, because she was an exceedingly nice girl, and I liked her. I told her she should have any share of the fees she chose to ask for. 'Oh, nonsense!' she said. 'No, it isn't nonsense!' I said; 'it's only fair.' 'Oh, well, then,' she said, 'if I get the piece done for you anywhere, you shall give me the usual agent's commission. Does *that* satisfy you?' We were talking quite chummily by this time. And I had another cup of tea.

"Before I went, her mother came in. Her mother didn't treat the commission so airily—her mother wanted the girl to have a contract. But that was all right; I put it on paper for her when I got home.

"There was nothing for me to see her about again for two or three months. I had heard from her that Alexander had no use for the piece, and that 'Sir Charles Wyndham had promised to read it on Sunday.' Then she wrote that she was

Digitized by Google

going on tour—and I called to say good-bye to her. There wasn't a cloud in the heavens, and I was still dependent on the mackintosh, but it couldn't be helped. I stayed longer that time. I could have stayed to supper if it hadn't been for the mackintosh!

"Of course she went on working at the business while she was away, and she used to write me what she was doing about it. She was a regular trump, and I liked getting her letters and answering them, though the prospects never came to anything. At last she wrote that she was coming back—and I called to say 'how do you do' to her. It still hadn't run to a new suit, and—I attribute a great deal to that mackintosh! it curtailed all my visits, I haven't had a fair chance with the girl.

"I had never loved before—so quickly; I was fond of her already. I hope, when you write the story, you'll bring her charm out strong; you had better send the manuscript to me, and I'll put in some of the things she has said—loyal, womanly things, without any grease paint on 'em. As I sat there that afternoon, sweltering in the infernal mackintosh, I knew I'd like to marry her; I knew that if the comedy ever caught on, I'd try to make my agent my wife.

"Well, when a production looked as far off as

Digitized by Google

Klondyke, there came this offer for the piece from Cameron, who had just taken the Throne. She was as excited about it as *I* was.

" 'The Throne isn't quite the house I'd have chosen,' she said, 'but you'll get a beautiful cast; Cameron will take pains with the smallest detail, you'll be pleased with everything—— Oh! I mustn't answer for your leading lady.'

"I laughed. There was no need for me to tell her I had faith in my leading lady.

" 'You have given me a chance!' she said. 'It'll be the best part I ever played. If this engagement makes me, I shall owe it to *you*.' There was one of the things without any grease paint on 'em. Wasn't it sweet? She'd have had every excuse for reminding me all the time what a service she had done me.

"We talked it over like pals. She said that, of course, Cameron would play the Colonel himself, and that he wanted to get Fairfax for the lover.

" 'Who's Fairfax?' I said; 'I don't know him. The lover is an important part—all that pretty scene of yours in the Orchard Act will go for nothing if your lover's not good.'

" 'Oh, Fairfax is a very clever young actor!' she said; 'we've never played together, but he has

Digitized by Google

just made a great hit at the Imperial; I saw him there; he was very good indeed.'

"Well, things couldn't have looked more promising. Cameron was enthusiastic—he didn't pay any money on account, but he gave me a cigar—the percentage he agreed to was satisfactory, and the girl I loved considered me her benefactor. Making a discount for disappointment, I hoped for a hundred a week from the Throne; besides that, there'd be the provincial tours, and there were the American and Colonial rights. I had visions of a house in Sloane Street, and a motor car.

"Then the expenses began again. I couldn't attend daily rehearsals through August in the mackintosh, so I managed to raise a pony on the agreement. The interest was iniquitous, but I was bound to have decent clothes, and on the threshold of a fortune I didn't fuss. I went to a tailor, and I bought a two-guinea panama, and had eighteen pounds left.

"Fairfax turned out to be a plain young man with a big head, and I didn't think so much of his reading as Miss Millar seemed to do. However, he improved. She, of course, was divine, and Cameron was all right. On the whole, I was satisfied with the rehearsals—dramatically; financially they were a shock. The luncheon adjourn-

Digitized by Google

ments upset my calculations. I always had to adjourn with Cameron—though I'd rather have taken Miss Millar—and Cameron lunched extensively. If a man stands you Bollinger one day, you can't offer him Bass the next. I had expected to enjoy the rehearsals, but the eighteen pounds were vanishing at such a rate that I thanked Providence when the last week came.

"Well, by dint of missing a rehearsal or two, I had contrived to cling to a fiver; and I shook hands with myself. I counted on it to keep me going till I got the first fees. Vain dream! They decided to 'try the piece' in Worthing for three nights—and I had to pay fares and an hotel bill! Old chap, when I walked here to the Throne, on the night of the London production, I possessed one shilling—and that went on a drink for the acting manager. In the morning I hadn't the means to buy newspapers with the notices of my own play. Penniless, I read them in a public library among the Unemployed!

"Of course, the notices bucked me up. With an 'emphatic success,' I could smile at being stone-broke till the hundred a week came in. But it didn't come. The box-office sheets gave me the cold shivers when I saw them, and the queues at the pit and gallery doors were so short that the 'niggers' gave up playing outside. The piece

Digitized by Google

always went very well, but there was never any money in the house; the audience always looked very nice, but none of them had ever paid. They look very nice this evening, don't they? Paper! Paper in rows! Paper in reams!

"A hundred a week? By the first Saturday night I reckoned my week's royalties would about cover the cost of my Worthing trip! And *then* I was optimistic.

"Cameron sent for me; he said:

" 'I'm afraid I must take this piece off at once.'

"The dressing-room reeled. I muttered that the notices had been good.

" 'It's more than the business is. Look at the booking!' he said.

"I hinted feebly that the best people hadn't come back to town yet.

"He said, 'Well, I'll give it a chance to pick up if in the meantime you like to waive fees.'

"I waived! I heard him in a kind of stupor. . . . I've never had a bob!"

Orlando paused; his head drooped sadly. I ascertained that the barmaids weren't looking, and pressed his hand.

"It's hard lines," I said. "We must have an-

Digitized by Google

other talk after the show. You won't mind my bolting now? The bell rang ever so long ago; the second act must be half over."

"A curse upon the second act!" he burst out. "Why did I ever write the second act? Don't see it!"

"But I must see it," I urged. "I want to see it. What's the matter with it?"

The dramatist was silent again; I saw that he was struggling with strong emotion. At last he said in a low voice:

"The rest of the story—so far as it has gone—is more painful still. Perhaps you suppose that, now it had stripped me of all and involved me in the meshes of a money-lender, the monster's malignity was appeased? Not so! Pecuniarily it could harm me no more, but through my affections I was still vulnerable; the monster's most insidious injury you've yet to hear.

"I noticed during the rehearsals that Fairfax was struck with Miss Millar; and lately Miss Millar has shown an unaccountable interest in the big-headed Fairfax. I call it 'unaccountable' because Fairfax, in his proper person, can't be said to account for it. She's always saying how 'tender he is in the part.' The *part's* tender! I own the man can act, but *I* gave him the lines

Digitized by Google

to speak! *I* invented the tender things for him to do. She doesn't remember that.

"Consider what happened when I wrote the piece! I imagined a charming girl in an orchard; I imagined myself in love with her. She had Elsie Millar's face; she answered me with Elsie Millar's voice. With all the tenderness, all the wit, all the fancy I could command I tried to make this charming girl fond of me. Materially, I was producing half a dozen pages of dialogue; psychologically, I was lending my own character to any man who played the lover's part.

"It fell to Fairfax—and it's all 'Fairfax' with her. Oh, she has been very sympathetic about my failure, we're still friends, but—there's another man now! She talks more of his performance than of my comedy. It's natural, I suppose—she understands his work better than mine—but I desert the second act; you shan't see the second act, the second act's the other man's glamour to her! She's falling in love with the part, and thinks it's with him. The monster gave him his opportunity—and *he's stealing her from me with my own words!*"

"Talk to her as you've talked to me," I said, "and hope still."

"I can't help hoping," he answered, "but——"

Digitized by Google

An attendant entered the buffet with a note: "Mr. Lightfoot, sir?"

Orlando tore it open—and passed it to me mutely. I read:

"DEAR MR. LIGHTFOOT,—I hear you are in front to-night. I've been waiting to tell you something all the week. Mr. Fairfax and I are engaged to be married—and we owe our happiness to your play. Will you come round afterwards to let us thank you?—Yours always sincerely, "ELSIE MILLAR."

"Poor devil!" I exclaimed. . . . "Well, the monster has finished with you now, at any rate! You know that you're disappointed in love, and you know that the last of the expenses is over."

"Y-e-s," he said. . . . "You think your editor *will* send a cheque for the story?"

"In overdue course," I told him. "Why?"

"Well," he moaned, "how am I to find the money to buy her a wedding present?"

Digitized by Google

THE TALE THAT WOULDN'T DO

"I CAN tell what's the matter with *you*," said the Bachelor Girl. "You've got a story to write!"

I had merely shaken hands with her, put down my hat, and chosen a chair by the fire; so I was surprised.

"My dear Sherlock Holmes!" I exclaimed, "this is wonderful. Accustomed as I am to your offensive society, I must own that I fail to see——"

"Nothing could be plainer, my poor Watson," she returned; "I have observed that you never look so unhappy as when you have to do any work."

Like all her deductions, the thing was marvellously simple when she explained it.

Her baptismal name is "Patricia." She is an extraordinarily nice girl, with seventeen faces. She changes them while she talks. There are, her moody face that is almost ugly, and her hopeless face with tragedy in it, and her radiant face that's bewildering—and the fourteen others.

Digitized by Google

If she didn't laugh at orange blossoms, you might approve her.

"Well, it's quite true," I answered; "I *have* a story to write—or, rather, I haven't a story, and I'm obliged to write one. I want to find a story about love; something piquant and yet tender, with——"

"Egyptian or American?" she asked sharply, passing the cigarettes.

"American," I said, "but it won't prevent my going on. Something piquant and yet tender, with a note of pathos, and a vein of sentiment, and——"

"Columns of drivel!" she put in. "What do you mean by coming here on a wet day and babbling about sentiment? Don't you know how ill it always makes me? Now, never mind your story; be a good fellow and cheer me up; I haven't met a man for a month."

"*I'm* not a 'man'—I'm married," I mentioned.

"And don't talk to me as if I were a Chiffon Girl, or we shall fall out. Think I want you to flirt with me?"

"I have no illusions left. Besides, I don't believe you could manage to flirt. Did you ever try?"

"Once."

"You don't say so! Was it a success?"

Digitized by Google

"Tremendous." She nodded. "Biggest joke you ever heard."

"Really?" I said. "Don't get up to make the tea, then. Keep where you are, and tell me about it."

So she crossed her feet on the fender and told me.

"There was somebody I knew," she said—"Bob. That wasn't his name really, but——"

"We can let him go at 'Bob,'" I agreed; "there's no need to give him away."

"I was only a kid—about nineteen—just beginning to paint. You wouldn't have known me in those days; I was 'utter'—intensely 'utter'—to look at; I used to flop, like the Burne-Jones things; I wore *garments,* and my hair *so!*" She showed me her comedy face, one of the "fourteen others." "He said I was a good fellow when one found me out, and told me not to make a guy of myself. I'd have boxed anybody else's ears, but I liked Dick."

"We re-christened him 'Bob,'" I reminded her.

"Oh, yes. Well, I've let it slip now. It doesn't matter—it was no one you know. He said my clothes and my slang didn't harmonise, and that I was bound to change one or the other. I couldn't change my slang, so I bought a human frock, and he sent me a hundred Nestors as 'A

Digitized by Google

Present for a Good Child.' Don't run away with the idea that I was sentimental about him; we were chums. He used to say the reason he took to me was that I wasn't silly like a girl; he used to say I was the best pal he had. He was only two or three and twenty—younger than *I* was, in some ways. . . . The poker's *your* side—stir the fire!

"Yes, we were awfully good pals for years. When he went to work in Paris—did I tell you he was an artist?—when he went to work in Paris, I could have howled with loneliness. I *was* so dull! I didn't seem to have anybody to say my best things to. Have you ever missed anyone like that? Something funny would come into my mind, and I'd wish I could say it to him; I'd think, 'Wouldn't it be lovely to be saying it to Dick!' Don't you know the feeling? I don't think I was ever so near to howling as when I'd thought of something funny. . . . I hope you do understand that I wasn't sentimental? If you fancy I felt anything but friendship for him, I shan't tell you any more."

"I understand perfectly," I said.

"Of course, we wrote to each other. But I was never good at letters—and, anyhow, what's the use of saying funny things if you can't hear the man laugh? He was away about a year. He

Digitized by Google

had meant to stay for two or three, but one day he wrote that he was coming home sooner than he had expected. He turned up the next afternoon; and it was 'Dick!' and 'Pat!' and 'Well, it *is* good to see you again!' You know! The first few minutes were jolly. Then I saw that he was keeping something back.

"I said, 'What you're going to do, is to sit down there and tell me all about it. You're in trouble, and I want to hear.'

" 'What a brick you are!' he exclaimed—a man's always astonished when you notice anything that's as plain as a pillar-box; a woman would have been waiting for me to say it from the moment she came into the room.

" 'Is it money?' I said.

" 'Well, in a way,' he said, 'it *is* money.'

"He had a small income from somewhere or other, but I had known him hard up for a thick 'un, and I thought perhaps I might be of use. I could have lent him a fiver just then without any bother, as it happened; so I asked him how much he wanted.

" 'About a thousand a year,' he answered.

"Well, that told me everything and I couldn't speak for a second. He was only my friend, but he was such a dear, good friend, and

Digitized by Google

I knew it would never be the same thing between us any more. . . .

"'Who is she?' I said.

"That started him, and he gave me a catalogue of her fascinations that made me tired. She was a Chiffon Girl. She had gone over to Paris with his sister, and been taken to see Dick's studio. Tea and twaddle!—he admitted she didn't know anything about art. 'Girlish,' he called her; I could imagine her in the studio—saying an artist's work must be 'such fun,' and calling every picture 'sweet'!

"By what he said, it seemed to me she was treating him pretty badly, for all she was so 'girlish.' She wasn't satisfied to accept him, and she wasn't satisfied to let him go. Didn't want to marry a poor man, but didn't want to lose his admiration. For the last six months he seemed to have been always bidding her an eternal farewell, and getting a note from her about nothing a week afterwards. She was back in London now—that was why he was here. His gush about her gave me a headache.

"'It's a treat to be able to talk it over with you, Pat,' he said.

"'Yes,' I said—'ripping!'

"He wanted to know if I thought she liked him.

Digitized by Google

"Well, it was clear she liked him, though whether she liked him enough to live in a fifth-floor flat in West Kensington I had my doubts. But she wasn't nearly good enough for him, that was the main thing. I said:

" 'Even if she'll have you, are you sure that you're wise to go in for marriage yet? Don't think I'm speaking selfishly, old man; we shall never forget we were pals, you and I, and I'll drop in sometimes after you're married and smoke a cigarette with you—if your wife will have me—just the same. It's you I'm thinking of—your own happiness. We've both such real pals, Dick—I know I may talk frankly to you: won't you be hampering your work? Won't you have to sink your ideals, and paint "The New Kitchens" and "Baby's First Rattle" to make the pot boil? Are you sure the game's worth the chandler's shop? Girls are good fun at a dance, or to flirt with up the river, but to settle down with one of them for life, dear boy!—a fellow's got to reckon up the cost!'

"Of course, he wouldn't listen—told me I was a confirmed Bachelor Girl and couldn't understand.

" 'If you'd ever been fond of anybody yourself,' he said, 'you'd know that, when one really loves, nothing else matters. I don't mind what

Digitized by Google

I "sink," I don't mind the cost; I want Rosie—she's worth all the pictures in the world.'

"'Sh!' I said, 'don't blaspheme! And dear old chap, don't think I'm unsympathetic—you asked me for advice, and I gave it to you honestly, that's all.'

"'You were always a good sort, Pat,' he said. 'But I didn't ask you for advice—I asked you if you thought she liked me.'

"'Oh, as far as that goes,' I said, 'I dare say you could marry her if you went the right way about it.'

"You should have seen him jump! 'How?'

"'So now you *are* asking me for advice!' I said. 'Well, don't make yourself so cheap, Dick.' (It was horrid to have to tell Dick he had 'made himself cheap'; I hated her for it; but it was true.) 'You've run back to her every time she lifted a finger. Show her you mean what you say. You can offer her a home—of a kind—and you've got a future, if you don't let circumstances spoil it. Very well, then. Tell her she's got to marry you, or say "good-bye" to you once and for all.'

"He answered that he *had* told her so.

"'Yes,' I said, 'repeatedly! But tell her so, and stick to what you say. The next time she

Digitized by Google

whistles, don't go. She'll like you twice as much for it.'

"I think it surprised him to find that I understood anything about girls; but I was a girl myself, though he didn't seem to remember it.

"He cheered up wonderfully after that. Funny my coaching him how to win her when I didn't want him to, wasn't it? But he trusted me, and I was bound to play straight with him: I should have been a cad if I hadn't played straight with him when he was trusting me. Still, it was funny, you know—it makes me laugh whenever I think of it."

I detected no amusement in her voice. She paused a moment.

"He dropped in a few days afterwards," she went on, "and told me he had done it. He told me she had said she liked him very much, but didn't want to marry; and that he had wished her 'good-bye.'

"'Don't "come down" in a hurry this time,' I said; 'when you hear from her next week, send her a few civil lines, and sit tight.'

"Of course he did hear from her—congratulating him on getting into the Academy, and saying she was going to see his picture on Monday afternoon. And when my lady went, he wasn't there. One to Dick!

Digitized by Google

"It was a black Monday for me, though—I had nothing but 'Rosie' all day long!

"And that was only the beginning of it. She didn't make another move for two or three months, and he thought he had lost her. He weakened then. He told me he used to tramp the room, thinking, half the night. His sister and I were the only people who knew—and his sister had gone to Pangbourne, so I got it all. Rather rough on me! But I was awfully sorry for him—I *was* sorry for him! His eyes in the morning!

"Then the girl made another step—she fished for an invitation to spend a week at Pangbourne. By that time he was in such a fever that he wanted to propose to her again as soon as she arrived, but his sister said 'No'; she said the best thing he could do was to make the girl fancy he was getting over it. I don't know how much trouble she had with him, but she rubbed her idea in pretty thoroughly, for he came and asked me to help him.

"He said, 'Alice thinks'—Alice was his sister's name; he said, 'Alice thinks I ought to be down there when Rosie comes, and pretend I don't mind any more.'

" 'If you go at all,' I said, 'that *is* what you ought to do at first.'

Digitized by Google

"He said, 'She thinks if Rosie once saw me making up to somebody else, it'd be all right.'

"'Well, I always told you that you had let her feel too sure of you,' I said.

"'The only thing is,' he said, 'there's no other girl there. Will *you* come down and see me through, Pat?'

"I did flare out then! To ask me to—I mean it did seem—— Well, it was a little too much!

"He was all apologies in a minute. I never saw a man so taken aback in all my life. 'No idea of offending me—I had been such a pal that he didn't imagine I'd cut up rough.' Said he had asked me as he might have asked Alice, only as Alice was his sister she'd be no use. He kept saying how sorry he was to have annoyed me—and looked amazed!

"Well, in the end I said I'd go. If you had heard him you'd understand—it was such a trifle, in the way he put it, and it seemed so strange of me to make a fuss. 'Oh,' I said, 'I don't care—I'll go down and talk with you if you like! Why not?'

"So I went. He treated Rosie beautifully—a nice friendly manner that widened her eyes. Blue eyes—and a dolly complexion, and flaxen hair; she only needed the ticket—'My clothes take off'! But she was very pretty—nothing to

Digitized by Google

find fault with, excepting that she hadn't a brain. Alice had invited a man who didn't count to take her in to luncheon, and Dick took *me*. Rosie was displeased with me at luncheon. Afterwards Dick showed me the garden, and I brought him back with a flower in his button-hole. Rosie was worried. During the evening, in the moonlight, I said pensively it must be divine on the water now—and Rosie looked as if she hoped I'd be drowned.

"We were away about an hour. Curious—we had never been on the river together before. He didn't bore me too much about her; he talked of his work, and mine, and—we had a lot in common. . . . It was about the last time we really did have a talk together.

"Oh, well, he had the game in his hands from the beginning! Before we had been down there two days he told me they were engaged.

" 'Hurrah!' I said. 'Good luck to you, old man.'

" 'You've been a trump,' he said; 'if it hadn't been for you, she might never have known her own heart. I'm so grateful to you, Pat, I'd like to kiss you.'

" 'Oh, rats!' I said—'I don't go in for sentiment.' "

Digitized by Google

The Bachelor Girl's voice trembled. She paused again.

"I *had* flirted, though," she added defiantly, "when Rosie was watching; and it was a great joke. They were married in the autumn. I never see him now, but he's selling 'The New Kittens' and 'Baby's First Rattle' for big prices. . . . It's time we had tea. Well, you wanted to think of a tale, and you've been told one instead. Not that it would do for you—it isn't pathetic."

"It wouldn't do at all," I said, "it's very humorous."

And I looked at the fire as I answered, because I knew she was crying.

Digitized by Google

THE LAURELS AND THE LADY

I

WHEN Willy Childers was sent to the Cape, he went to the last country on the face of the habitable globe to which he was suited. It is certainly a question whether he would have made a success of life anywhere, but at the Cape he was so much out of place that he became conspicuous. In Paris, when he had learnt the language, he would at least have felt at home; he would have drifted by slow degrees into a congenial set in London. But on the Diamond Fields, a young man who hoped to be a poet, and who already wrote verse, was an incongruity that defies comparison.

To give him his due, he was conscious that his presence was absurd there and justified the chaff that it received, and he loathed the "Fields" with a deeper loathing than any other member of its perspiring population. But he could not go to the length of altering his nature and becoming brisk and enterprising, nor did he want to do that. It was not with his nature, but with his

Digitized by Google

environment that he found fault. "Lucky rhymes to him were scrip and share," and he was full of confidence that his "mellow metres" were going to make him celebrated one day. He would rather have been left in peace with plenty of stationery than have had the business of any broker in the Market.

It was as a broker that he began. His uncle, Blake Somerset, was the manager of the Fortunatus Mining Company in Bultfontein; and when Willy came down from Oxford, Somerset wrote, to the Dulwich villa, that, "now all that damned University foolishness was over, the boy had better buckle to and try to make a living."

It must be conceded that Willy had not distinguished himself at Oxford, and displayed no ability for any of the recognised professions.

All the same, the suggestion that he should buckle to in South Africa sounded to him preposterous. Dimly he had had visions of being called to the Bar and obtaining pleasant chambers where he could write poetry all day without being disturbed. But he had reckoned without his mother, without her faith in her brother's judgment. The letter had made a strong impression on her mind, and at the idea of its being scouted she both showed temper and shed tears. The lady's antecedents and sympathies were com-

Digitized by Google

mercial. She, too, had felt Brasenose to be foolishness—indeed, she had felt the adjective which she might not use; and the possession of a son who seemed content to roam about the garden with a book of Rossetti's, or Walter Pater's, and who confessed that he didn't know the multiplication-table, was causing her considerable disquietude. She wondered if there had been any eccentricity in the past "on poor dear Robert's side."

Yes, the maternal view was different from Willy's. She retracted her suggestion that he should read for the Bar—it had been but a half-hearted compromise when she made it—and declared that the Cape offered far finer prospects. She decided that it was just the plan "to take the nonsense out of him"; and she answered her brother to the effect that his nephew would sail in two or three weeks' time, though she refrained from explaining to him what kind of young man his nephew was.

Somerset was not long in finding it out. He himself looked like a farmer—or as one expects a farmer to look. He had a big red face, and a loud laugh, and was powerfully framed. His biceps might have been a gymnast's. Willy was a disappointment the moment he alighted from the train, being slightly built and consumptive-

Digitized by Google

looking. And he had no conception of business: that was evident in their initial conversation. Without a suspicion as yet of the young fellow's tendencies, Somerset felt instinctively there was something wrong with him. The ignorance of things that he ought to have known might be excused in remembering the kind of training that he had had; but there was something worse than ignorance; there seemed to be a hint of incapacity. Not only had he no ideas about making money, he didn't appear interested or intelligent in the matter—a fact which promised no brilliant future for him, considering that all he would have at the widow's death was three or four hundred a year.

Nevertheless, being responsible for his coming, Blake Somerset did his best for his relative, in a rough way.

"Look here," he said, after a few days, "I think broking will be about your mark here, youngster. You ought to earn ten or twelve pounds a week at it, if you're smart. I'll take you round the Market to-morrow and introduce you."

Willy replied that he was much obliged.

"What do I do?" he inquired.

"Do? You sell the stones! You go into the dealers' offices every morning and ask for parcels,

Digitized by Google

and then you cut about into all the other dealers' and show 'em. It's a pity you don't know anything about a diamond, but you'll soon pick a smattering up. And you're always safe to say 'I've a nice little lot that will just suit you.' "

The description was not very attractive to the Oxford man; but being already uncomfortably conscious that his uncle did not think much of him, he made a gallant attempt to simulate an alacrity that he couldn't feel.

The introductions were duly effected, and, having procured a licence, Willy embarked on his career as a diamond broker without delay. He was equipped with a morocco-leather satchel, furnished with many pockets and designed to carry all the "parcels" that were to be entrusted to him.

But he did not get any. He hadn't effrontery enough. When he made his applications he asked as briefly as possible if there was anything for him, and slunk out mortified as soon as the man said "no." This though he did not fail to observe that his more experienced competitors entered with a cheery greeting, an air of confidence, and sometimes "Such a good story! I must tell you, Mr. Meyerstein!" which proved much more effectual. Half an hour after the Market opened he had repeated his dreary formula vainly in

Digitized by Google

every doorway in the street. Then he returned to his hotel, and dreamed of fame and England. His uncle, hearing of his speedy withdrawal, told him that it wouldn't do. If he wished to succeed, he must remain on the scene and manage to look as if he were succeeding. Willy, with a heavy heart, took the hint; and from ten o'clock till four henceforward, with the thermometer at a hundred degrees in the shade, he bustled round and round the crooked little flaring road, vaunting his empty satchel as if he were very busy indeed. But the pretence did not seem to impress any of the dealers, who sat in their shirt-sleeves, behind the wide windows, weighing diamonds in lack-lustre scales; and when he called, they always replied that they "weren't sending anything out this morning," just the same.

At last Somerset wrote to his sister that her boy had better return to Dulwich. He said wittily that there was "no opening on the Fields for poets"—he had discovered Willy's bent by this time—and warned her that living was expensive there; the future Laureate would loaf more cheaply at home. Mrs. Childers replied that she felt such surroundings to be desirable for the formation of her son's character. He had no father, and a young man who did not seem to have any proper ambition would be a great responsibility

Digitized by Google

for her to cope with alone. Perhaps by-and-by Blake might be able to put him into "a clerkship or something" that would enable him to keep himself decently? In the meanwhile, the extra expense would not amount to so much as his passage would cost! Somerset, who had lost all interest in his nephew, accordingly looked about, and presently contrived to obtain a post for him; and Willy went into the Magistrate's Court at Du Toit's Pan, to keep the Criminal Record, and take affidavits of assault and other offences, at a salary of three pounds a week.

That had been two years ago; and, as if to justify his uncle's poor opinion of him, he was a clerk in the same place still.

This afternoon he sat idly before his desk in the sweltering office, and gazed through the bars of the open window at two or three Kaffir prisoners in charge of a police serjeant, waiting till their names were called. They had their backs against a wall, and their feet in the thick, hot dust. Through the door that communicated with the shed-like court, he could hear the droning tones of the assistant magistrate disposing of the case in hand.

Presently the voice of the interpreter, shouting "Jan Sixpence! Piccanini! Tom Fool!" proclaimed the turn of the negroes outside. The

Digitized by Google

serjeant gave them a push, and they moved forward apathetically, drawing their blankets closer about their skinny thighs. The baking wall and the glare of dust were all that was left to see. Childers closed his eyes wearily—his sight had been troubling him of late—and leant back in his chair, wondering if life had any surprise in store for him—if anybody else on earth was so entirely wretched.

His faith in himself had deserted him by now, and he no longer foresaw himself a celebrity. He was very young indeed for confidence to have gone, but he was not naturally self-reliant, and it had been chaffed out of him. He was sick with a longing for sympathy—quite the last thing attainable here. In truth, he presented one of the most pathetic figures that the world displays, though he was regarded in the camp as cutting a ludicrous one, for while he experienced all the emotions of genius, his Vesuvius brought forth a mouse; he was in temperament an artist, and in destiny a clerk. His verse was disgraceful; at times—much more rarely than he knew—there was a flash of something better than grace in it; but in the force to set him free from the environment that crushed him it was lacking. He flapped feeble wings, like Sterne's starling in its cage, crying, "I can't get out!"

Digitized by Google

The interpreter brought in the list, for the misdemeanours and sentences to be entered in the record.

"Good-afternoon, Massa Childers; I'm gwine home."

"Good-afternoon, Mukasa."

II

It was a quarter to five. Mr. Shepherd, the assistant magistrate—a young man with a pink-and-white complexion, who had grown a beard in order to make himself look older—consulted his watch and yawned.

"Heigho, poet!"

"Tired, sir?"

"Tired and dry. We'll have a liquor as soon as we shut the shop. By the bye, the mail's in."

The assistant magistrate was always among the first to know when the mail was in, being engaged to a girl in England. Later on she would make her home here, and cry to be back in Clapham.

Childers was also interested in the arrival of the mail. He had submitted his volume of poems four months since to perhaps the only firm of publishers left for it to go to, and it was within

Digitized by Google

the bounds of possibility that there might be a line by this time conveying their "regrets."

"Are they delivering yet?" he asked.

"I didn't hear," said Mr. Shepherd; "my letters always come to the Club. I say, are you going to the theatre to-night?"

"Not to-night. Of course I shall go some evening or other. But I expect all to-night's seats are gone."

"No, they say there are still some left to fight for at the doors. All the best ones are gone, you bet—two pounds each!"

"Great Scott! Better than clerking—eh?"

"Better than trying niggers in the Pan, too," said the assistant magistrate. "Did you ever see her at home?"

Willy shook his head.

"Have *you*?"

"I saw her once, yes—in my last holiday. I don't know French, but I shall never forget it as long as I live—no kid! She *is* the greatest actress in the world; she turns you inside out."

"I wish she played in English," said Willy, filling his pipe; "she might just as well—they say she speaks it fluently. Have you got a match, *baas*?"

Rose Duchêne had been tempted to Kimberley. There had been an excited rumour of her

Digitized by Google

coming the year previous, but the negotiations fell through, and there was nothing better than a prize-fight on the border of the Orange Free State. Now the famous actress had actually arrived. The local papers had been teeming for weeks with all the anecdotes of her that had been worn threadbare in Paris and London a decade and more ago. Her eccentricities, her extravagance, her pet tiger-cub, and her eighty thousand pounds' worth of dresses—the public read the stories all over again, and enjoyed them. Such of the stores as sold photographs had crowded their windows with her likenesses, and the walls of the corrugated-iron theatre, and the bar beside it were placarded with the name of Rosa Duchêne in letters five feet long. Every editor on the Fields had rushed in person to interview her; and this morning's *Independent* detailed her "impressions" of the place, which she had artlessly declared seemed to her to contain a larger number of handsome men and pretty women than any other city of its size that she had seen. Even Rosa Duchênes cannot afford to neglect such "impressions."

Willy lit his pipe, and puffed at it with a sudden sense of pleasure. Yes, he would go this evening, if he could get in! It would be an emotion

Digitized by Google

tasted earlier than he had expected it. Did Mr. Shepherd mean to go?

Ted Shepherd said that he did. The five-shilling seats were quite good enough for him, and they would go together if Willy liked. He glanced at his watch again, and started.

"The devil!" he exclaimed, "we've stopped five minutes too long. Come on, poet, we'll go and have that drink."

They picked up their wideawakes hurriedly, and strolled into the Club.

The boy behind the bar had fallen asleep and was dozing as peacefully as the flies allowed, for work in the mines did not conclude till "sun-down" and the Club was almost deserted at this hour. The only members visible were a digger, whose enterprise had terminated by reason of exhausted capital, and a law-agent without any clients, and a medical man who had many patients but rarely received his fees.

The civil servants had brandy-and-soda, and the assistant magistrate played with the dice-box.

"I'll shake you who pays for both to-night, if you like, poet," he said.

Willy nodded, and won, and ordered fresh brandy-and-soda to celebrate his victory.

They had scarcely swallowed it when they became aware of an angry mutter, mingling with

Digitized by Google

the whir of the buckets and the throbbing of engines across the road—a clamour of impatient voices. The digger, who was looking at a picture of Hyde Park Corner in the *Illustrated London News*, and wondering how long it would be before he saw the original again, became aware of it also, and he dropped the paper with apprehension.

"I'm afraid that's about *me*," he said, turning rather pale.

"What's wrong, Johnny?" asked Shepherd.

"It's the Boys, I expect! You see, I couldn't pay 'em this morning; they'll go for me if they get the chance."

Willy went to the door, followed by everybody excepting Johnny Teale. A gang of some fifty niggers, Zulus, Kaffirs, and Basutos, of all ages, had surged to the foot of the *stoep*—a low, gravelled veranda before the club—and were demanding their wages, or Mr. Teale's blood.

"It *is* the Boys," said Willy.

"I thought so. Well, tip 'em some of your verses, poet, and calm 'em down!"

"Why don't you pay the beggars?" said the law-agent.

"Pay 'em?" echoed the ex-lessee of the Mooi Klip Mining Company. "That cursed ground

Digitized by Google

hasn't yielded working expenses for weeks. Pay 'em? Do you think I'm the Standard Bank?"

The doctor exhorted him to come forward, and he came gingerly. His appearance was greeted with loud yells, and a hundred naked arms were lifted in execration and appeal. In the instinctive way that the negroes lifted their arms, there was a touch of dignity, even of tragedy, that would have gladdened a London super-master's heart. Presently, however, by dint of fervid promises which he had no prospect of being able to fulfill, Teale succeeded in inducing the posse to depart. And, this consummation attained, he dragged his supporters jubilantly to the bar.

Childers was not among them. He made his way, through the dust and ox-wagons on the Market Square, to the post-office, only to find the publishers had not written; and then, retracing his steps, he went into his room to lie down. His eyes ached badly, and he was sure that he saw less clearly still. The doctor had told him that the trouble was caused by his "general condition" and advised him to rest his sight as much as possible. But rest had not improved it, nor had the lotion and the tonic done any good.

Soon afterwards the piercing shrieks of engines announced that work in the mines was over for the day; and now men poured up in shoals,

Digitized by Google

to wash, and dine, and to exchange—to-night—their Bedford-cords for dress-suits that were relics of a European past.

In Kimberley, dress-suits were worn more frequently, but Kimberley was three miles from Du Toit's Pan and, by comparison, fashionable. There were even men in Kimberley who wore stiff collars every day. And the theatre was there. Du Toit's Pan had nothing but the Club, and an hotel, and a corrugated-iron church.

It was early when Childers and his chief met again and drove into the larger township. But a crowd had already collected under the electric lamps of Main Street. And when the doors were opened, and the pair at last gained seats, they squeezed into them breathless.

A long procession of "carts" sped over the bare connecting road in the next half-hour. The "Rush" hummed with "carts." Comparatively small as was the theatre, it appeared to those in it to contain the population of all the camps. When the orchestra came in, the house looked like a hill of white arms and bosoms, and shining shirt-fronts. A novel and agreeable flutter of suspense stole through the audience; women glanced and smiled towards one another with little, excited nods. Many had forgotten, for the instant,

Digitized by Google

where they were and, in fancy, were transported to the Français or the Gaiety, where they had seen Duchêne last.

Some touch of the excitement below communicated itself to Childers upstairs. As the three foreign knocks sounded, he leant forward eagerly. The play was *La Dame Aux Camélias*. It began with a few lines between de Varville, seated by the mantelpiece, and Nanine, the maid. Willy strained in vain to distinguish what was said; he had never read the piece, though he knew the plot.

There was the entrance of Nichette; she spoke briefly to Nanine, and left. And then followed an exhausting conversation between the man and the girl, during which the audience suppressed their impatience as best they could; few understood more than a word here and there, though many assumed an air of keen appreciation. There was the peal at the bell; there was the servant's exclamation, "C'est madame!" . . .

She came on in her best style—while the women caught their breath at her gown; she affected unconsciousness that an audience was criticising her. But they would not have it—they were too grateful to her. The applause broke out, vociferous and sustained. The Diamond Fields were welcoming the only important actress that had

Digitized by Google

then come to bless them, and it was nearly a minute before she could speak.

As the act proceeded, Childers found his throat tightening queerly. The story has been as much abused as any that was ever written; but sickly, unhealthy, morbid, or not, it is a story that appeals to almost every imaginative young man. It fascinates him strongly as it develops; perhaps he, too, may one day meet a Marguerite? In secret he has often wished to do so; and he identifies himself with its hero, who, on the stage, is so splendid in his romance and passion, and in the book, by his own confession, as arrant a cad as ever escaped having his head punched. From a theatrical point of view it has a greater recommendation: it provides a leading actress with an opportunity which few modern dramas equal. And to-night Duchêne, who had carefully selected it for her opening performance, availed herself of the opportunity to the fullest.

She was at this time nearly forty years of age, but behind the footlights she did not look a day more than twenty-five. Her grace, her power, the tricks—which in their apparent spontaneity concealed such cleverness that it demanded a fellow-player to appreciate them as they deserved—took one novice among the spectators by storm. At the end of the second act he felt that he was

Digitized by Google

in the presence of a revelation. During the fifth act, tears rolled down his face, and he tried furtively to hide them with his programme, afraid that Shepherd would ridicule him.

The result of Willy Childers' going to see Rosa Duchêne was really a foregone conclusion; gun-powder had met the spark and only one thing could happen. A poet—that he was a pseudo poet matters very little—who had been eating his heart out on the Diamond Fields was confronted, for the first time in his life, with a beautiful woman who was a genius. When the curtain fell and the people rose and screamed at her, Willy did not scream; he kept his seat, quivering hysterically. He was wrenched by the death-scene that he had witnessed; the agony of the lover's cry was in his own soul. He wanted to walk away somewhere alone. The companionship of Shepherd was torture to him, and he thought that he would have given anything that could be named to have the right to go to her and stammer what she had made him feel.

Such exaltation sounds very absurd, but, closely examined, it is not so absurd as it sounds. After the illusion of intimate confidence that is created by sympathising with a great actress through the range of emotions that she represents —laughing with her laughter, and grieving with

Digitized by Google

her when she grieves—one leaves the theatre having seen nothing at all of her real nature. But how much has one seen of the young girl's with whom one may, more conventionally, fall in love at a dance? Both have uttered things that were not natural to them during the evening; and, to say the least of it, the actress's pretence has been as attractive as the girl's. One man would like to take her out to supper; another would make of her an ideal and an inspiration. She has charmed them both; and the fact that suppers may be more in her line than inspiration is irrelevant.

He escaped from Shepherd, and taking up a position by the stage-door, waited there in the hope of obtaining a glimpse of her when she left. The hope was not fulfilled; she must have come out by another exit.

The intense dry heat and the sun's blinding glare had been succeeded by a faint breeze, and as he drove home his mind spun more quickly for its freshness, and the rapid motion of the "cart." He thought again of his volume of verse at the London publishers', and saw it accepted and triumphant. An unfamiliar exhilaration throbbed in his veins, and fancy mounted beyond control, playing all sorts of pranks, unexpected and delightful, till it seemed lifting him into heaven.

Digitized by Google

It was only when the horses stopped that he returned to reality. From the stagnant *pan* came the croaking of frogs, and the howling of innumerable stray curs. The mine yawned deeply in the night, and, with the suggestion of gigantic gallows, the structures of the hauling gear round the reef rose blackly against a luminous sky. From the Club, there was the click of billiard balls and a jingle of glasses. But he did not go in.

III

SHEPHERD was the first to suspect what was the matter. Probably because he saw more of Childers than anybody else did; possibly because incriminating compositions on the Government stationery fell under his notice. Indeed, it is said that the girl at Clapham received a tribute in verse from the assistant magistrate about this date. Anyhow suspicion arose; and Willy's reception of the tentative chaff was as damning as plain acknowledgement—and much more comical. Altogether it was voted the most comical thing that "the poet" could have done. "Childers in love," pure and simple, would have been an amusing object, but Willy Childers in love with Rosa Duchêne was a situation that tickled Du

Digitized by Google

Toit's Pan uncontrollably. It became the favourite pastime to lure him into the smoking-room and invent anecdotes about his enchantress. He was old enough to have forgotten how to blush, but he blushed still, and his face, while the stories were told, supplied them with a superfluous sauce piquante.

And cartoons were made of him, and pasted on the wall. In one he sang—

> "Ask nothing more of me, sweet,
> All I can give you, I give";

and was depicted on his knees to the actress, with an ode in one hand and a child's money-box in the other. Life was made in various ways a burden to him, though no one meant any harm. "Good-morning; have you been to the theatre, Childers?" became the stock joke, a catch-phrase with which he was greeted by everybody; and when he did go to the theatre now, he slunk in late, and hid himself at the back of the gallery from shame.

It was when half of Duchêne's season of six weeks had expired that the chaff stopped; and it stopped abruptly. For the first time men spoke of Willy Childers in a tone of gravity. One morning he had not appeared at the Magistrate's Court; he had sent a few lines in a pain-

Digitized by Google

ful, sprawling hand, to say that his sight was much worse—that he was "afraid it was serious"; and a few days after that, the news circulated that he was blind.

In improving tales, when the misunderstood boy loses his sight, all his acquaintances reproach themselves for their cruelty towards him and flock to his simple parlour to listen to him talking like a tract and derive a lasting moral from the patience he displays. It did not happen like that in Willy Childers' case, because the men had no idea that they had shown any cruelty. Excepting for Ted Shepherd, and one or two other very occasional visitors, he passed his time in unbroken solitude.

Of course it was useless for him to remain on the Fields any longer. Somerset, who in a few months' time was going to England for a brief holiday, had arranged to take him home; in London a specialist was to be consulted, and perhaps an operation might be performed. Meanwhile Willy was removed to the manager's cottage on the Fortunatus works. His uncle came there to sleep, between the hour of the Club's closing and "sun-up" each morning; during the day a Kaffir fetched his meals from the Carnarvon Hotel. He had no one to talk to; he knew none of the pursuits by which the blind contrive, after years, to

Digitized by Google

occupy themselves. He could do nothing but think, and compose verse in his head; he sat helpless in the blazing iron shanty, listening to the clamour of machinery, throughout the day, or the crooning of Kaffirs, crouched round their bonfires, when the moon rose. And in this fashion a fortnight wore itself past.

Johnny Teale was the man! Others participated, and so were guilty—among them Blake Somerset—but Johnny Teale was the man that suggested the trick; let it be stated! There was a girl in the "Rush" in those days referred to as "Poll Patchouli"—she had opened a shop, at the back of the Diamond Market, for the sale of bad scent, after she left the ladies' orchestra, with which she had come from Natal. Her real name was not known. She called herself "Olive Esmond," but that has nothing to do with it. She was not considered pretty; she was, in fact, thought very plain, even in a spot where men were not exacting in the matter of feminine attractions and a little comeliness went a long way. She was, however, an amusing girl, not wholly uneducated; and a fortnight after Willy's retirement to the cottage opposite the Fortunatus tailings-heap, it transpired that she had a singular accomplishment: she could imitate Rose Duchêne to the life. She did it so well, according to an

Digitized by Google

enthusiast who had heard her, that she might have got an engagement at Home at a music-hall. He said you "could have shut your eyes and sworn Duchêne was speaking."

It was precisely this criticism that gave Johnny Teale his idea. If you could shut your eyes and think Duchêne was speaking, she might be presented to a blind man as Duchêne herself.

Some of the group to which he propounded it certainly demurred. They said it would be blackguardly to play tricks with Childers now and objected a good deal in an irresolute way. But Teale set himself to argue their scruples into air. For Childers to have a conversation with Polly under the impression she was the actress "wouldn't do the poor chap any harm," he insisted—"on the contrary, it'd give him immense pleasure." And as to the humour of the sell, it would be one of the best practical jokes ever perpetrated in the camp.

That was true, and a strong temptation.

Reiterating that the victim need never know; that no disappointment was entailed; that the scene would be no less delightful to Childers, because the happiness was illusory, he had his way at last. And Polly was interviewed and coached. A deputation went up to Kimberley to see her.

"We want you to help us in a tremendous

Digitized by Google

spoof, Polly," they said. "You've heard of Willy Childers?"

No, she had not heard of him; who was he?

"Well, he thinks he's a poet, and he has lost his sight, and he's in love with Duchêne," explained Teale. "Now, we want to tell him we're going to introduce him to her, and then bring him to *you*—d'ye see? He'll make love to you as violently as he knows how, and you're to pretend to be awfully taken with him, and kid him on—d'ye see? Of course you'll talk all the time like Duchêne, and end by vowing he's the only man in the world for you! And we—two or three of us—'ll be hidden about the place somewhere, watching the game—d'ye see? *You* know! D'ye think you can do it?"

The girl laughed. She was not disgusted by the infamous taste of the project; it struck her as being an uncommonly funny one.

"You may bet all you've got I can do it," she said. "Rather! What a lark! When'll you bring him, boys?"

"Well, it's got to be carried out carefully," said Teale; "one of us must go and say that he has met her; and then, very kindly, say he'll try to get permission to present Childers to her. He's as green as they make 'em, but it won't do to

Digitized by Google

rush the thing through as if it were as easy as ordering a drink. Say Thursday, eh?"

"Right," said Polly. "Thursday. Is he really crazy for her, or just spoons?"

"Shouldn't wonder if he knelt down and kissed your boots."

She threw back her head and laughed again.

"I shall enjoy this," she exclaimed. "It's something I like!"

No time was lost in acquainting Willy with the privilege that might be in store for him; and for a moment the expressions of gratitude into which he broke made the conspirators feel almost as despicable as they were.

They left him in a fever of suspense for a couple of days. And then he was told that Teale and Ted Shepherd were to take him to Duchêne on the following afternoon.

"I let her know you wrote poetry," said Teale; "I cracked you up a lot before I asked permission to bring you. It wanted a bit of nerve to do it, considering I'd only met her once, myself, but I knew how keen on it you were!"

Willy, who was trembling, groped for his hand, and pressed it.

Indeed, he could hardly realise that the bewildering thing had happened. It was actual! he had to repeat it. The prospect of sitting by

Digitized by Google

Rosa Duchêne and hearing her talk, though he wouldn't see her, dizzied him. At night he could not sleep; and he passed the long morning praying to hear each hour strike on the little American clock that he had bought to let him know how the time went since his watch became useless. When Teale and the assistant magistrate arrived, and guided him up into the "cart," the effort of replying to them was pain. He thanked God when he could be silent. His breathing apparatus was playing the same tricks that it had played in the theatre, and the clip-clop sound of the horses' hoofs seemed to be vibrating in his inside.

The hotel to which they were bound was not the Queen's, where Duchêne was really staying, but a third-rate hotel called the Royal, and his companions had misgivings lest he should detect the difference. On reaching Kimberley, Teale began to talk again eagerly, to distract his attention; but it was taking unnecessary trouble. His affliction was too recent, and his excitement too great, for the dupe to have such acuteness of perception.

The driver stopped; and Shepherd, who had agreed to come, less because he looked forward to being amused by the deception than because he wished to see that it was not carried too far,

Digitized by Google

helped the blind man down, his pink-and-white complexion pinker than usual.

They were met in the hall by a Kaffir servant, who had been carefully rehearsed in his part. He showed his teeth in a grin of appreciation.

"Is Madame Duchêne in?" said Teale. "We're expected."

The negro disappeared, and after a few minutes returned to conduct them to a poor, ground floor room that opened on to a *stoep* and a back yard. At one end was a small bedstead, with a washhand-stand at the foot. The rest of the furniture consisted of a chest-of-drawers, a chintz-covered couch, and a couple of basket-chairs. A few coloured plates from the summer numbers of the English illustrated papers had been pasted on the walls.

"Madame Duchêne soon come," he said respectfully; "madame says, the *baas* please wait!" Then he grinned more widely still, and pointed to the window. Behind it, half a dozen bearded faces were pressed; half a dozen arms waved gay salutes.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Teale, as the Kaffir retired. "We're in a drawing-room again, eh?" He gave a soft whistle, expressive of admiration and astonishment. "What do you think of this?"

"It's all right," said Shepherd, confusedly.

Digitized by Google

Teale nudged him and frowned.

"'All right'?" he echoed. "Well, I don't know what *you* were used to, my lord, but it's about as fine as anything *I* ever struck. Look at that tapestry, and those bally idols over there, and—why, the woman must be mad to carry such things about with her!"

"What's it like?" asked Willy in a reverent voice.

"It's Oriental," said Teale; "shouldn't you call it 'Oriental,' Shepherd? By Gum! I should like to see her flat in Paris, if this is the sort of thing she goes in for for six weeks. What's the Eastern smell; don't you notice it?"

It was a pastille that had been set burning in the soap-dish. He affected to explore for it among countless treasures.

"This is it," he said; "in this Pagoda affair. What does she keep her rooms so dark for; a bit mystic, ain't it? Take care! don't move, Childers, or you'll tumble over a tiger's head. Hullo!"

There was a woman's step in the passage, and as they caught it, Willy turned a dead white. The group outside, who could see but not hear, puffed their cigarettes and continued to stare in curiously.

"Here she is," murmured Shepherd. "Stand up, boy!"

Digitized by Google

Willy obeyed as the door opened; and Poll Patchouli came in.

IV

"GOOD-AFTERNOON, gentlemen," she said languidly. "Ah, monsieur! be seated, I beg."

Her "monsieur" was the only false note, and of that he was no judge. Every pulse in his body leapt at her entrance; every nerve in him quickened at the rustle of her cheap little frock across the floor. To him it was brocade of a mysterious rose tint and there was old lace on her bosom.

She sank into one of the basket-chairs, and looked towards his companions for approval, with her tongue in her cheek.

"I am very pleased to see you," she said; "your friends have spoken about you to me."

"You see one of your most ardent admirers, madame," said Teale, "and a poet. I'm afraid Mr. Shepherd and I are in the way at the meeting of two artists."

Willy lifted his hand in discomfiture.

"Don't make me absurd," he stammered; "don't laugh at me, madame! I'm not an artist, I only hoped to be one. But I'm grateful—ever so grateful—for your letting me come here. To

Digitized by Google

have spoken to you will be something to remember all my life."

The girl smiled almost as broadly as the negro had done.

"You are very—very—what is the word in English?—complimentary," she drawled. "You must not make me vain, you know! And you are too modest also—is it not, Mr. Teale? I am told that your poems are quite charming."

Even Shepherd was amused; she was doing it very well. The spectators at the window pushed against one another inquiringly.

"Will you not recite one to me?" she asked.

"Bravo," said Teale, "the very thing! Go on, Childers; let madame hear something you've done."

"I couldn't," said Willy. "Forgive me, madame; I couldn't, indeed!"

"In Paris," said Polly, "many poets recite their verses to me. Yes, truly, you are too modest, monsieur. Well, as you please; then let us talk! You are fond of the theatre, eh?"

He bowed. "Passionately of late!" he answered awkwardly.

"Aha! but he can make pretty speeches, too, our modest poet. You, Mr. Teale, have not said anything so nice to me. But perhaps you do not feel it, either?"

Digitized by Google

"Everybody raves about madame Duchêne," said Shepherd; "Mr. Teale and I are very honoured to be—er—very honoured indeed."

He caught signals from the onlookers, and drew Teale's attention to them. They were growing impatient out there. The dialogue was lost upon them, and viewed as a pantomime the scene was dull. Polly saw the gestures, too, and shook her fist at the crowd joyously.

"To-night," she resumed, "I play one of my favourite rôles—Marguerite."

In point of fact she was mistaken: Duchêne was to play Frou-Frou. But Willy could not read the newspapers any more.

"I've seen you in it," he said eagerly. "I was at your first performance. I shall never see you in it again."

"Why?"

He flushed.

"I said 'see'—I can't see you at all."

"How long have you been like this?" asked the girl, deprecatingly.

"Nearly three weeks. It seems——"

"It seems a year, I suppose? It must!"

"Yes," said Childers, "it seems much longer than it is. I daresay I shall get used to it by-and-by, but a day's a long time at first; I'm all alone, and there's nothing to do."

Digitized by Google

"It must be awful," she murmured.

"Mr. Childers is going Home very soon," said Shepherd, "and then all of us poor beggars'll be jealous of him."

"You and he may meet in London, madame," added Teale. "You'll go to the theatre next time madame Duchêne plays in London, won't you, Childers? Perhaps she'll let you call on her there, too?"

Polly shifted her chair irritably.

"Will you be able to go about in London, Mr. Childers?"

"I don't know many people in England," he said; "I'm afraid not. I shall be in Dulwich, with my mother."

"But you will make friends," she urged; "won't you? You won't be tied to the house always?"

"I shan't be very lively company; I don't suppose many men'll be anxious to be my friends."

"Ah, well," exclaimed Teale, "'a boy's best friend is his mother!" Ain't she, madame?"

"Gentlemen," said Polly, springing up, "I'm sure you two would like a cigar on the *stoep!* Don't move, Mr. Childers. They'll come back to you."

Johnny Teale stared.

"You would like a cigar on the *stoep*," she

Digitized by Google

repeated. And as it was evident that she meant to be obeyed, they said that it was a very kind suggestion, and withdrew. Teale consoled himself with the idea that they were to be afforded a view of Willy on his knees.

She did not speak for some moments after the door closed. She sat in the chair that Teale had vacated, with her back to the window. Her expression had changed and her face was quite soft.

"Are you pleased they've gone?" she asked.

"Yes," answered Willy, simply.

"So'm I. I want to talk to you—I like you. Do you know, I never was so sorry for anybody in the world before?"

"You make me feel almost glad I'm blind.—I've prayed that I might talk to you one day. I used to pray to see you, too. But that's impossible now. That night——" He paused, afraid.

"What night?" said the girl.

"Your first night here. You know, I wasn't blind then, and—— Oh, it's like a dream! Is it really you I'm telling it to?"

"It's me," said Poll Patchouli, her eyes shining. "And what?"

"I came away praying to be great, just to have the right to meet you. I've always wanted to succeed, of course—ever since I was a child; but that night it was different. It was to know

Digitized by Google

you . . . to hear you say you had read my verse . . . to feel there was a sort of—a sort of sympathy between us. Are you laughing at me?"

She put out her hand and touched him. She had given her hand to many men, but never quite like that. Willy had a wild impulse to lift it to his lips, but did not do so—afraid again. She had hoped that he would.

"Do you like me as much as you thought you were going to?" she asked, after a silence.

"Yes," said Willy; "you're just what I was sure you must be."

"Really?"

"Really!"

"That's good!" she said, smearing a tear off her cheek with the hand that was not resting on him. "Shall you come again—I mean alone?"

"May I?" he cried. "Do you mean it? Oh, but how can I—I forgot! I can't go anywhere alone any more. This is the first time I've been out since I lost my sight—Teale and Ted Shepherd offered to bring me."

"The beasts!" said Poll Patchouli in her throat.

"If I may come again with them——?"

"No, don't do that! Where do you live? Perhaps one day, as you're all by yourself, *I'll* come

Digitized by Google

and see *you*. But I don't want you to talk about it, if I do. I—— No, I never *shall* come!"

"Why? Why not? I won't speak a word of it to a soul if you don't wish me to; but it would be a charity—I'm sure you'd have no need to mind. Oh, I'd bless you, madame! Please!"

"Why do you like me?" she said sullenly. "You must be an awful fool to like a woman you don't know!"

"I do know you now," he faltered, shrinking. "And besides——"

"Besides—what?" said Polly.

"I had seen you on the stage; is that nothing?"

"Never mind the stage. Imagine you've only seen me here to-day."

"Well?"

"You want me to come?"

"I implore you to!"

"Oh, yes, because I'm Duchêne! If I weren't a great actress, you wouldn't care a button whether I was sorry for you or not. Well, what is the address?"

"I'm in the manager's cottage—Mr. Somerset's cottage—on the works of the Fortunatus Mining Company," he gasped. "Any driver'll take you to it; it's in Bultfontein."

"I know," she said.

"You know?"

Digitized by Google

"I mean I have heard the name. No, my acquaintance with the Diamond Fields is not so extensive as all that, monsieur! But I will find it, and I will come."

Her accent was much more marked in the last sentence than it had been a few moments ago, but its resumption was unnecessary; the first impression had been all-powerful, and he was drunk with delight.

Indeed, when the entertainment was over, he was the only one who was entirely satisfied with it. Johnny Teale and his party felt that the hoax had "panned out less brilliantly than it had promised"; and Polly, alone in her room, threw herself on the bed and cried miserably, without knowing why.

V

It was significant that she did not call upon him for three days, though she wanted to do so very much. It was significant also that, when she did go, she put on her prettiest hat and frock and made herself look as dainty as she could, though her host would not be able to see her. Her visit intensified that strange emotion to her, pity for a man. And the step, once taken, she went again—without vacillating. And Bad Shil-

Digitized by Google

ling was despatched for meals for two from the Carnarvon; and their afternoons were so pleasant that sometimes before they parted, stars were in the sky.

There was now demanded of the girl an infinitely more difficult achievement than that required of her at the Royal Hotel; she found herself expected to realise, and respond to an artist's aspirations. She could not do it, quite. But if she simulated more comprehension of them than she could feel, she did, by degrees, come to gain a glimmer of the blaze within him, too. She had to strain for it hard at first—so hard that she was surprised at her own patience; many of his confidences were meaningless to her, foreign. Why should he await an answer from the publishers with such suspense, when he didn't expect much money even if they took the book? But during those long afternoons and evenings, while Willy talked to "Rosa Duchêne" as he had never thought to find himself talking to anyone, Polly sat opposite him in the rocking-chair, with attentive eyes, learning a lesson.

Once, just as she was leaving, Blake Somerset came in. He had heard that his nephew was receiving visits from a "lady" in the cottage, and guessing who the lady must be, intended to put a stop to them. He was rather ashamed of him-

Digitized by Google

self for having allowed the joke to be played at all, and the discovery of the lengths to which it had been carried annoyed him.

Polly started in alarm, but Childers, who had no cause to be embarrassed, performed what he believed to be the ceremony of introduction with perfect calmness.

"I don't think you have met my uncle," he said; "have you? Mr. Somerset—madame Duchêne."

Somerset was about to answer with a brutal laugh, but a gesture from the girl checked him.

When they were outside, and out of earshot, she stopped and looked at him appealingly.

"Are you going to give me away?" she said. "Are you going to tell him? Don't! I'm not doing any harm. Please don't tell him!"

"This is damned nonsense!" exclaimed Somerset. "The boy's an ass, but you've no right to have a game like this with him, you know; it won't do!"

"I'm not doing any harm," she insisted, "really! Of course it's a beastly shame in one way, but—but it does cheer him up. You must see for yourself how much brighter he is. And—and if you tell him, you'll break his heart."

"Rats!" said Somerset. "Don't talk such piffle!"

Digitized by Google

"You'll break his heart!" she flared out. "Not that you'd mind much, I suppose, if you did. Well, go back and do it. Go in and say, 'That isn't Rosa Duchêne who comes to see you; it's a girl they call "Poll Patchouli" and everybody's been kidding you.' Go on! Then you won't have to take him to England—because he'll be buried here before you start; and it'll be you who'll have killed him, as sure as a gun!"

"D'ye mean to tell me," said Somerset blankly, "that you think he'll never find out? You must be as daft as *he* is, you little fool. . . . Oh, well, *I* don't care; do as you like—it can't last long, that's one thing! When are you coming again?"

"I'm coming to-morrow," said Polly. "And if you think it all so shocking, I wonder you let those swine bring him to my room. At all events, I don't guy him, as you meant me to."

Then she jumped up into the "cart" and drove away. And Somerset dropped into the Club and told Teale that, "funny as it sounded, he believed that girl was mashed on the boy"; and the posse of conspirators sat and viewed the development of their plot with open mouths.

She meant her deception to conclude with the actress's departure; and it was only when the time came that she perceived how strange a hold the deception had established on her—how much

Digitized by Google

she liked the young man who talked to her of things that she had never heard talked of before. The temptation was too strong to be resisted; and, prompted by the fact that Duchêne's season had been extended for a week, she told him, when she went on the morrow, that it had been extended for six weeks.

Childers' joy was pitiful to behold. He had been happier of late, in his blindness, than he had ever been when he had sight; the sudden news that his paradise would endure, when the groan of its closing gates was already in his soul, was a relief so intense that its outcome frightened her.

From the beginning she had been aware that he was in love with her; but now she saw how wildly he was in love, and she was aghast. Her life had not accustomed her to regard sexual attraction as a serious matter. Though she had not continued to view her imposture lightly, she had not grasped the full responsibility of it till then.

She gazed at him wildly, with trembling lips, like a child who has smashed something.

"Are you so glad," she faltered—"so glad as all that?"

The consciousness crept through her, as she asked it, that she, too, was glad—not in the friv-

Digitized by Google

olous way that she had thought, but as a woman is glad to remain with a man who has grown dear to her. She moved slowly over to him, and took his hands down from his face, and dropped on her knees before him—wondering at them both.

"Willy," she whispered, "say something—I love you!"

He couldn't answer. But she felt what she had done. And she forgot then that the whole thing was a lie—forgot what an exclamation would burst from him if he could see her. It was her own kisses that he was returning; it was her own clasp that made him shake like that!

The deception had gone further still, and there began for the blind man a period in which he tasted all the triumphant rapture of possessing a beautiful and celebrated woman whom he adored. When he embraced Polly, his delusion gave him Rosa Duchêne in his arms; when Polly clung about him it was Duchêne's touch that thrilled his blood and Duchêne's lips that burned. He lavished on Polly the madness of the passion that Duchêne had inspired; he saw with his brain the form of the famous woman that intoxicated him, while Polly the insignificant was lying on his heart.

The ecstasy of the delusion dizzied him. Rosa

Digitized by Google

Duchêne was his own; visited him daily; vowed she was wretched when they were apart! She, a genius, renowned all the world over, discussed with him the prospects of his poems' acceptance and entered into his hopes and fears! Why was he a nonentity? If only he could climb nearer to worthiness!

One afternoon, a fortnight later, when Polly went to the post-office to inquire if there was anything for him, she found that the publishers' reply had at last arrived. She saw their name on the envelope; and a roll of manuscript, which the clerk handed to her also, showed that the work was declined. She took the things, almost as disconsolate as her lover would be, and wondered, on her way to the cottage, how she was to break the news to him, how she could be gentle enough.

He had come out on the *stoep* to listen for her. He knew where she had been, and the eagerness on his face made the words that she had to speak more difficult to her still.

"Dearest!" said Childers—and waited.

"There's a letter," said Polly, reluctantly; "I haven't opened it yet." The rejected manuscript oppressed her; she put it down on the table with her sunshade.

"From *them?*"

"Yes."

Digitized by Google

"Read it," he begged, breathlessly. "Read it, Rosa, for Heaven's sake!"

She opened the envelope, looking not at it, but at him. It was hateful that it should be she who had to bring the disappointment! The colour was fluttering in his cheeks, and the thin hands held out towards her quivered. Suppose she told him a fib? Suppose she said——? He couldn't *see* the answer! As the notion flashed into her mind she caught her breath; and Willy heard her.

"They've taken it?" he exclaimed.

She was trying confusedly to discern what difficulties such a falsehood would entail, but his question decided her—she could not crush him with the truth after that!

"Yes," she said in a low voice, "they have taken it."

"Rosa, Rosa! Oh, my God! Read it to me! What do they say?"

"They say. . . . Oh, darling, I am so glad for you, so glad! Willy, aren't you happy? I told you it'd be all right, now didn't I?"

"What do they say?"

"They say—— How can I see, if you hold me so tight, silly boy? It's only a line. 'Dear Sir, we shall be pleased to publish the poems you have submitted. They will be . . .' What is it? 'They will be brought out soon.' That's all. So

Digitized by Google

—so perhaps they aren't going to pay you for them; but you won't mind that, will you? They'll publish them! And they say 'pleased.' They might have said 'willing,' but they say 'pleased'!"

To her the communication that she had invented sounded very meagre; but she need not have striven to apologise for it. To him the bare fact was more than enough. They were going to bring out his book. He would hold it—hug it—and "soon"! He had been craving all his life, and on an instant Fortune rained favours on him with both hands. Balzac's expression of every artist's prayer recurred to him, "To be celebrated! To be loved!" He marvelled—giddy with exultation—that he could be so calm in the face of miracles. He was Rosa Duchêne's lover and now his *Reveries* was to be given to the world! Then a frightful misgiving seized him.

"You haven't deceived me—it's true?" he gasped.

"It's quite true!" cried Polly. "How could you think such a thing?"

They embraced again, and he told her how proud she should be of him by-and-by.

"You'll 'make' me!" he panted. "If I have written these before I knew you, what shall I do now? I shall be great; Rosa, I shall be great. The man you love'll be known, too—*you'll* have

Digitized by Google

done it for me. What a beautiful world we live in; and it's the same world that was so ugly the other day! O darling Life, it blows kisses back to me! You fill me with emotions and ideas that tumble over one another. I shall pour them out in my work—my mind and heart are bursting sometimes, too small to hold all you make me feel. I'll dedicate every book to you—you who'll have inspired them all. Oh, thank God I'm a poet! To worship you as I do and be able to lay nothing at your feet would have been torture."

He wandered about the room, with her arm round him, while her troubled gaze turned from time to time to the roll of manuscript on the table.

"Did you believe I was an artist when we first met," he broke out again, "or was it only pity? Did you feel we had something in common different from the others? Oh, how vain of me that sounds! But you know—you know how I mean it!"

"I know," she said.

"And you did—you did feel there was a bond between us? Tell me. I want so much of you, dearest! I want more, and more, and more every day. I want more than I can tell you, and more than the utmost. It's as if nature hadn't provided for such a love."

"What can I do?"

Digitized by Google

"You know your thoughts before you speak them! I'm jealous of that."

"You're mad!"

He nodded. "I daresay. Nothing satisfies me. But I can't see you—if you knew how I strain! I'd give my right arm to see you now. Turn your face up, and let me try. Great God! it's a wonderful thing to be a woman—and somehow it doesn't seem enough to be a man. One day I'll try to tell you all I feel for you. If I could do it, it'd be the finest poem ever written. And what a relief!"

When she left, the moon was shining. She slipped the manuscript up under her dust cloak, and, reaching home, hid it away remorsefully at the bottom of her box. What would be the result of the lie she had told? She upbraided herself bitterly for her cowardice. But now for him to learn that his work was rejected would be a blow unbearable! Now, whatever happened, he must not know; he would curse her!

VI

In the night the remembrance struck her that she had left the note in his possession; she was seized with the terror that he might show it to Somerset and discover the truth with the rudest

Digitized by Google

shock possible. She lay tossing restlessly, and the sun had scarcely risen when she drove to Bultfontein, with a face of ashes.

Willy was not visible. He was dressing, with the aid of the Kaffir who attended on him. She sank on to the first chair inside the door and tried to gather voice to call to him.

He entered from the bedroom almost at the same moment, and his appearance suggested that the catastrophe had occurred.

His greeting, however, dispelled her fear.

"I've had news about my mother," he murmured; "she's dead."

The mail carrying Childers' poems had also brought a letter to Somerset. Mrs. Childers had opportunely died of pneumonia—avoiding the arrival of a son who had had no proper ambition, and who was now blind besides. Somerset had had a long talk with him the previous night, after Polly's departure. The widow's death put difficulties in the way of the young man's return to England. The manager was going with the object of enjoying himself; moreover in three or four months he was to be back on the Fortunatus works. He had pointed out that there would now be nobody to take charge of Willy in London. It was an awkward thing to determine what was to become of him. Seldom had a young

Digitized by Google

man who had inherited about three hundred and fifty a year been such an encumbrance.

All these facts Childers imparted to Polly.

"We haven't decided what I'm to do," he went on. "I couldn't stop here permanently. even if I wanted to; I'm bound to be a nuisance, you see. It wouldn't be fair for a fellow like me to plump himself on an uncle for life."

"Have you told him about your book?"

"No, it wouldn't interest him—and we talked about my mother's death. No, I didn't say anything about it."

"And I wouldn't, if I were you!" she exclaimed. "I wouldn't say anything to a soul till it is printed. Let it be a secret between us two till the right time comes."

"That's what I thought, darling," he said; "yes."

She passed the day between relief and dismay. It was piteous to think of the loneliness of his situation. She could not have loved him more tenderly if she had been his wife; the further complication that had arisen to harass her appeared, temporarily, graver than anything else.

Willy was no less dismayed; his grief for the loss of his mother was not all. He longed for Duchêne to propose his travelling to England by the same boat as herself, to say that she would be

Digitized by Google

his constant companion till they had ascertained whether an operation was feasible. This way out of the difficulty must have presented itself to her, he thought; but she had not suggested it. And for him to do so was impossible.

A little constraint crept into his conversations with the girl now; and while she inwardly commented on the difference, he was tremulously waiting, in every pause, for her to make the offer that had never entered her head. Their dream might have continued in England, more deliciously than he had ever dared to hope, and, instead, they were to be divided entirely, by her own choice! He was bitterly wounded, and not even the anticipated arrival of his book—the subject on which he chiefly talked with her—was potent to banish his mortification.

His allusions to his book were, indeed, often perfunctory; but their effect on his listener was disquieting enough. The first of the consequences of her lie was already at hand to worry her. She repented that she had said "soon" in her improvised acceptance, and wondered how soon a publisher's "soon" might mean. Childers was equally ignorant on the point, and in answer to her nervous queries he said that the copies might reach him any week.

She could do no less, after this, than pretend

Digitized by Google

every mail day to go to the post-office to inquire for them, and affect to be disappointed when she informed him that nothing had come. She groped, perplexed, in the labyrinth that she had created, questioning helplessly how to sustain it. If the truth were exposed at this stage she would have done him the cruellest, the most cowardly wrong imaginable, and she'd make away with herself! Her only excuse for the deception was that, so far, it had been successful. If the truth came out, after all, it would be the end of her; she'd be like that girl in Bultfontein Road who had taken carbolic acid the other day and been found in a blue heap on the floor!

After each mail she gave thanks for another respite. But when four mails had been delivered, she feared that a longer delay would excite his suspicions. And, facing the inevitable with the courage of despair, she nerved herself to contemplate the boldest stroke that she had planned yet.

While she was perpending it, the prospect of Willy's making the voyage with his uncle was extinguished definitely. Somerset was starting at once, at a couple of days' notice, for a very brief trip indeed. His subordinate on the Fortunatus had been offered a better appointment, and it was necessary for the manager's vacation to be taken while the other was still on the works. In

Digitized by Google

the circumstances, Willy would be more than ever a burden.

Somerset explained that he would make time to see the solicitor to the estate and endeavour to arrange for the boy to be looked after in London; there were always fellows going over, and he could travel with someone else later on. That he himself should take him was impossible.

Willy did not remonstrate. But the end of the imaginary extension of Rosa's season was terribly near now; Rosa Duchêne, as a matter of fact, was at this time at Monte Carlo, dropping some of the Diamond Fields' money at the tables; and he felt hopelessly that the woman he loved was fading out of his life for ever. He could have cried with the pain of it.

He sat in the slip of a sitting-room the night before the departure, while Somerset banged his portmanteaux about and made cheerful remarks. Somerset was wondering whether he should drop a hint to the lad about Polly; he decided that he would ask Ted Shepherd to keep an eye on him, instead. Willy was longing for him to be gone —longing to be free to abandon himself, unseen, to his misery.

In the morning he felt his forlornness less when the sound of the "cart" wheels had died away, leaving him to the mercies of Bad Shilling

Digitized by Google

for the next two months, than he had done while the preparations were going forward. But the consciousness that they all found him an incubus was bad to bear.

His welcome to Polly when she appeared was the outcome of the consciousness and alarmed her. Having taken off her dust coat and hat, and tried vainly to make him talk, she began to prepare their tea.

At last, glancing at him, she said diffidently:

"Has anything happened—you have not much to say? What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing particular. My uncle has gone, that's all."

"'Gone'? Gone where?"

"To England. It was settled two days ago; didn't I mention it?"

"No," she said, "you didn't. It's strange you forgot to! . . . Then you're quite alone here now —all night, too?"

"Yes," he answered; "all night, too."

But he did not say any more; and with a stare of puzzlement, and her face a little paler, she stood silent. The kettle had been filled, and the wick of the spirit-lamp was lighted; she stood waiting for the water to boil.

"It's boiling, Rosa," said Willy; "I can hear it."

Digitized by Google

"I was thinking of something else," she said, starting. . . . "There!"

After a moment's struggle with himself he asked, "What were you thinking of?"

"What's the difference?" said the girl.

"*I* was thinking, too."

"I know!" She ran to him impulsively and bent over the chair. "We aren't the same to each other! What is it? Tell me!"

He laughed—or sobbed: "It's you!"

"Me?"

"Oh! don't make me say it! You know as well as I do that I shall be alone in this Heaven-forsaken hole—that, for all one can see, I may end my life in it. *He's* gone, and *you're* going. Picture me sometimes—you'll always be able to think of me just as you left me. That's the advantage of knowing a log!"

"Willy!" she cried. "What do you mean? Why do you——?"

"I shall see more of Bad Shilling after you're gone—if he's kind. I shall learn to look forward to his remembering me and listen for his black feet on the boards, as I used to listen for *you*. Has 'anything happened'? My God!"

"Why do you talk to me like this?" she exclaimed. "Don't you think I'm sorry enough for you? You talk as if I could help it; *how* can

Digitized by Google

I help it? If I can, tell me the way! I'll do it. I'd love to do it! You reproach me for nothing!"

The boy's eyebrows were raised significantly, and she flung herself on him in a whirlwind.

"If I can help it, tell me the way! You *shall* tell me. I don't know what you mean—I swear I don't. I won't let you go till you tell."

"You—haven't thought?"

She shook her head vehemently.

"So why don't you say? Oh, I forgot—I was shaking my head! No, no, no; I *don't* know, Will!"

"You'll refuse if you want to?"

"Answer! Yes, I'll refuse if I want to. Answer!"

"We—you and I—might go to England together."

Her clasp on his neck loosened and she lay in his arms limp with dismay. This, the natural course in the rôle that she was assuming, was a complication utterly unforeseen by her.

"Go together?" she gasped.

"You don't wish it?"

"Yes, yes! I do! I do! But how?"

"It'd be quite easy. Let your company go on ahead, and we can follow by another boat! I've thought of everything. In that drawer, there's

Digitized by Google

my money—you'd take it and get our tickets to Cape Town. I don't know exactly how much money there is, but it's nothing like enough for our passages, and when we got down to the Colony I should wire to the lawyer, and he could cable me out a hundred or two."

"Go on, Will," muttered Polly feverishly, "go on!"

The blessed revelation that she was not expected to pay for her own passage—a thing that would have been as impossible for her as to buy the Kimberley Mine—had brought the colour to her cheeks again. The one question that dizzied her now was, how could she sustain his belief that she was the actress if they travelled on a steamer full of people?

"Well, when we were Home, we would go to a great oculist—somebody who sits in his consulting-room and charges a guinea a minute; somebody with a strange manner that we don't like at first, and who doesn't look like an oculist a bit, but is marvellously clever, like the one in *Poor Miss Finch*. And he'd give me back my sight—my sight! my sight! and I could see you when we kiss!"

She yearned at him, pitiful and afraid.

"To think it should never have struck you! Rosa, I've been breaking my heart because you

Digitized by Google

didn't suggest it; I thought you didn't care for me any more, that you had grown tired. Won't it be glorious? I shall see your beautiful face close, at last, and it'll be you who helped me to do it. Sweetest, tell me we are going! It seems too wonderful to be true."

"We're going," she said. She put her hand through the open window and pulled at the water-bag. Roughly made of canvas, with the neck of a beer-bottle inserted for a spout, it hung there to render the mawkish, lukewarm water fit to drink. The iciness of its contact with her forehead now cleared her brain.

VII

Compared with this new and stupendous difficulty, the dreaded need for meeting his demand for the copies of his *Reveries* appeared a simple matter enough. When she came next, she placed a parcel on his knees with so little misgiving that she was surprised at herself.

The poet gave a cry of delight. "My book! It's my book!"

She told him to cut the string; but his fingers shook and he couldn't manage it.

"Oh, I can't! . . . You!"

She took the penknife from him; and then let

Digitized by Google

him unfold the wrappings himself. Six volumes met his touch with an electric thrill—all alike, but each to be caressed apart from the others, each of them lovable and delicious. How delicate was the surface that he stroked! He was holding his firstborn—and he thanked God. The emotion was the true emotion, though it was conjured up by fraud; it was the bliss of ignorance, but, none the less, bliss. He was holding his firstborn, and Polly had given him a joy no meaner than Heaven would have given had it granted him the power that he fancied he had displayed. Six copies of another work, and imagination were as potent as reality.

"Tell me what it's like," he whispered.

"It is," she said, "a pale, curious fawn. The edges are stained a deeper shade, and the name of 'William Childers' is at the bottom of the cover, a little to the right, in dark, antique lettering."

"Let me trace it! Show me!"

She obeyed, terrified, watching his efforts breathlessly.

"I can't make it out. But it looks well, eh—it looks well?"

"It looks beautiful," she said.

"The paper's thin," he murmured; "I hoped they'd give me better paper."

"It's thin," she confessed, remorsefully, "but

Digitized by Google

very *good* looking. I think it looks more uncommon than if it had been thick."

"And the type—big? Is there a wide margin?"

"There's a very wide margin," asserted Polly. "Give me your finger again—there, all that is margin. And the type's splendid! I can read it from here." She could; she could read: "The Norman Conquest. Edward was not a vigorous king; he had little authority, while——"

He cuddled the book, with a long-drawn sigh of content.

"Perhaps soon I shall be able to see it! Rosa, when do we go—need we wait long? I'm on fire! But, oh, I'm happy, too—happy, happy! I'm happier than I ever hoped to be, although I've no eyes. Since I knew you my whole life has changed. How can I repay you?"

Suddenly a passionate desire seized him. "Read me the first poem," he prayed. "Read me *Sic Itur ad Astra;* let me hear Rosa Duchêne speak my verse!"

She stood speechless. Her head was swimming.

"Rosa!"

"Wait!" she stammered; "it's new to me. You are a poet, and it's new to me. Wait till I know them, Willy—I have a reputation to lose."

Digitized by Google

She thanked her guiding star she had retained the manuscript; and he, his disappointment passing, thought how sweet was this timidity in such a woman. He told her his thought, with triumphant tenderness. She resolved that he should have plenty of opportunities for the triumph in future.

She had proposed that, on the journey before them, she should adopt his surname. To explain the unavoidable suggestion, she had urged that, while Duchêne's features might be familiar to many, Duchêne's name would be known to all and entail perpetual embarrassment. In agreeing with this, he had removed her initial anxiety from her mind.

Freed from it, she made the needful preparations with less of fright in her soul. And now, since they were to go, she was sometimes eager for them to be gone soon. There was the contingency that a man might drop in on him and at the final instant destroy the whole fabric of the deception that she had weaved. She strove to persuade herself that she might preserve her lover's delusion more securely where she had only strangers to fear than she could have done on the Diamond Fields. But then her reason mocked her for the hope. So many things might happen! She dared not look ahead. Alternately

Digitized by Google

she longed and trembled for the hour that was to see them start. She was fighting pluckily, but in moments the enormity of the undertaking to which she had set her hand paralysed her, and at every step she seemed called upon to vanquish a further obstacle that had not been suspected till it barred the way.

When the morning broke at last, her predominant sensation was pleasure. Her own luggage was ready, and while Bad Shilling went for their breakfast she was busy packing the remaining things of Willy's. She was still on her knees, endeavouring to fasten the box, while Willy sat on it, when the Boy returned. His additional weight—for he was a "boy" of about forty years of age, weighing twelve stones—disposed of the matter; and they sat down to the coffee and steaks at the untidy table gaily, reminding each other that it was for the last time.

The negro had come back with a "cart"; and, the meal concluded, they made haste to leave. As they mounted to their seats, the doors of the cottage, and of all the sheds about the works, banged violently; the long, low swishing sound was heard that heralded a dust-storm. In another minute the air was dark, and they hid their faces to shield them from the hissing, stinging grit. Such dust-storms were of constant occur-

Digitized by Google

rence, but in this one the little Hottentot driver appeared to read a warning, for he lashed forward the horses furiously. They gained the station before the rain that he had foreseen began to fall; but it did fall, in floods—sweeping less fortunate animals off their feet; and Polly's cheerfulness deserted her as she glanced back into the deluge. Superstitiously she felt that the adventure had opened under ominous conditions.

VIII

However, the thirty odd hours in the train were uneventful, and they reached Cape Town safely. Again both were exhilarated. The comparative freshness of the atmosphere; to her, the sparkle of the sea beyond the jetty; and to him, the scent of it; the odour of flowers, and the rustle of trees, were delicious after the desert that they had left.

And he drove in a hansom again—a white hansom, with a coloured driver truly, but a hansom! They went straight to a little inn, of which Polly had heard, outside the town. It seemed to her to be almost at the foot of the mountain whose squareness broke off so sharply against the intense blue sky; and, obtaining rooms, they sat down and smiled at each other in delight.

Digitized by Google

"How clean everything feels," said Willy—"the towels, and the chair-covers. It's jolly."

She had been thinking so, too. Inside, it was clean, and outside it was green and tranquil. The road that the hostel overlooked was, at this part, an avenue of firs, glinting here and there with branches of the silver-leaves that are sent to England as birthday cards, with stiff little views, or sentiments painted on them. Presently a Malay maidservant—a starched, white triangle from the arm-pits down, with a bright silk fez upon her head—came in with their dinner, and they tasted fruit once more; not fruit as it was procurable in Kimberley, but luscious peaches, and purple figs, and a watermelon plucked since an hour. They sat dawdling over their coffee by the window while the moon rose, and now and again the thrum of a banjo was borne to them on the stillness. And Childers smoked a cigarette, because the situation seemed to call for one, though he enjoyed it only with his fingers now.

In the morning they took one of the trains that pottered between the suburbs and Cape Town, and sent the cablegram to the solicitor. But they were not impatient for the money to arrive. They contemplated with fortitude the two or three days that they would have to pass here.

When the answer came and they left the bank

Digitized by Google

with a roll of notes in Polly's pocket, they went to the office of the company that had a boat sailing next, to engage their passages; and here they met with their first disappointment. All the berths were booked, and it was necessary for them to wait for the *Union* steamer, which left a week later.

It was disconcerting, but it couldn't be helped. After all, they were comfortable at the inn, and though Childers experienced more regret than Polly, he was not very seriously chagrined, either. They walked home talking, for it was an agreeable walk after one had passed the smell of the tannery at Papendorp. He spoke of the suspense in which he waited to learn how the critics received *Reveries*—the humiliation he would feel if they sneered at it. And then the girl told him how the scene about them looked; of the fields of arum lilies despised like buttercups in England; of the clusters of maidenhair-fern fluttering in every hedge.

"Look!" she exclaimed. "Oh! I'm sorry. . . . I mean how sweet this is, Will, this villa. Those high cactuses—cacti, what is it?—divide us from the garden, but here, at the gate, one can see in. The lawn is yellow with loquat trees, and crimson with japonicas. It's all patches of colour, and shadow. And it's got a perfect duck of a

Digitized by Google

stoep, and—— Oh, a lovely old negress with white hair, who's coming down to us! Let's go on—she'd bother us to go over it, perhaps—it's to let."

"We shall find a difference when we get to London, shan't we?" he said. "Fancy it! January! The cold, the wet; the bustling crowds in the foggy streets, and the mud-carts, slopping over. What a contrast!"

"London has got suburbs, too. Dulwich, where you lived, is a suburb, isn't it? It wouldn't be like that if we went to Dulwich?"

"No," he said, "we shouldn't find crowds in Dulwich, because the people who live there never go out; and there'd be no mud-carts, because in deadly Dulwich the mud is never cleared away. But its long, dreary, desolate roads aren't like this one in the least."

Cape Town appeared to him, in spite of his affliction, much more attractive now than it had done eighteen months before, when he saw it. The thought occurred to him that he might turn their enforced delay to account by consulting one of its medical men and obtaining a second and more authoritative opinion. He mentioned the idea to Polly, and she ascertained that the best man to whom he could go was an Englishman—Dr. Eben Drysdale.

Digitized by Google

They heard very encouraging accounts of his ability. Though not a specialist he had effected some remarkable cures in ophthalmic cases, it was said; and after Polly had written for an appointment, Willy grew more and more excited at the prospect of the visit.

The girl herself did not know what to desire. As they mounted the steps of the house, her knees knocked together. To hope the man might say that no operation would succeed sounded so heartless that she was ashamed to look at Willy while her struggle with the hope was going on; yet for his sight to be restored would mean a tragedy for them both. She often prayed, though to many it may sound improbable; and she shaped an inward, irresolute prayer as they stood waiting to be admitted. She said, "O God, You know all about it—help me to want the thing that he'll like best!"

In appearance Dr. Drysdale was not impressive.

When Willy had finished explaining, he said:

"Yes, yes, to be sure! And you're on your way back to the old country, eh? Well, let's see, let's have a look." He put on a strange contrivance and examined the eyes through a peephole in it. . . . "And how long is it since the trouble began?"

Digitized by Google

"My sight has been weak for a long while. It's been getting very bad for the last eight months; and about nine weeks ago it failed altogether. At least, I wore a shade for a few days, and then——"

"Yes, yes," said Dr. Drysdale.

"Can anything be done?" asked Polly.

The doctor pondered. "Well, I wouldn't say that no one over there would advise an operation. You might go to Pholett, or to MacIntyre—I daresay MacIntyre might do it—and it's possible it might be partially successful. But . . . Your husband?"

She bowed.

"The question is whether it's good enough for him to go to England on the chance. Anyhow, I shouldn't recommend him to live there."

"I don't understand," said Willy, heavily.

"It wouldn't do your lungs any good, you know. Here, you've everything in your favour. *My* advice to you's to stay where you are. . . . Let's tap you about a bit; you might take off your coat and waistcoat . . . yes, and your shirt, too. Now then, draw a deep breath. . . . Again."

"My lungs aren't strong," stammered Willy. "I know; they never have been. But what you're implying's news to me."

Digitized by Google

Polly rose in consternation.

"Do you mean that he's ill, doctor—very ill?"

"I mean," said Dr. Drysdale, suddenly evasive, "that I wouldn't recommend England for him, that's all. It isn't a climate that we choose when there's a tendency to any pulmonary complaint, and—and, as your husband says, his lungs aren't exactly strong."

There was a pause that lasted some time.

"We may as well go," said Childers, at last; "I'm glad to have had your opinion. Good-morning."

But as Polly went to the head of the stairs, he turned and spoke to the doctor hurriedly on the threshold.

"I want it straight, please!" he said in a low voice. "If I live in England, how long shall I last?"

"One can't say," said the other, deprecatingly; "Nature at times——"

"Roughly? I'm not a child! How long?"

"So far as I can judge, from a cursory examination, I should give you about two years."

"Good God! And here?"

"Here? With care, and if you avoid excitement, you may live for ten. More! But you *must* avoid excitement, mind!"

Digitized by Google

The girl was coming back, eager to miss nothing; Willy heard the frou-frou of her skirt.

"If I can't avoid excitement," he questioned, desperately—"if that's impossible?"

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"You won't live so long."

IX

Willy and Poll Patchouli left the house silently. She could not express her comprehension in words, and she loathed the passers-by that prevented her taking him to her heart. To him the shock was awful. Now he knew the meaning of various sensations that he had set down to "lassitude" and "depression"!

She squeezed the hand that rested on her arm.

"My poor boy!" she said.

"It's—it's rather hard lines, isn't it?"

She noted absently the brutal blue of the sky, the fierceness with which the bay sparkled. The noise of a little traffic in the road was deafening.

"You must stop in Cape Town and get well," she murmured. . . . "Are we going back by train?"

"Yes," he said, drearily. . . . "I suppose so."

His thought was, not that his sight was lost for ever; not that England would never now be any-

Digitized by Google

thing to him but a memory It was, that she and he must separate. *She* would go—perhaps a little later than they were to have gone together; perhaps much later. But she would go!

"It seems that it was fated," he said.

"What was fated?"

He had taken it for granted that she must be thinking of the same thing. But she was suffering with her own identity and had not remembered to view the situation as Duchêne.

"Why, that you were to leave me out here, after all."

"Leave you?" Then realising the position, she was staggered. Would Duchêne leave him? Or would she stay, regardless of everything else? She didn't know! It looked to her impossible that Rosa Duchêne would renounce her career and become the jest of Europe, in order to remain with Willy in Cape Town. . . . But mightn't it look impossible because Rosa Duchêne was nothing but a great name to her? She was a woman, too. If a great woman loved him just as much, wouldn't she now be suffering just as much—wouldn't she ache to stay with him just as much as she herself was aching? . . . It was so difficult! "We must think about it," she said.

Would consent entail discovery—or was his belief in the actress's devotion equal to accept-

Digitized by Google

ing such a sacrifice without suspicion? As the train bore them homeward, she sat staring from the window, asking herself the question. She was now grateful for the presence of strangers; she did not want to speak.

On the platform Willy exclaimed:

"What do I care—we'll go together all the same! I'd rather be with you and die, Rosa, than be left alone and live. Don't let's think about it any more; we'll go as we'd arranged!"

"Are you mad?" she cried.

He persisted, but she would not listen to him. And all the afternoon she waited—trying to perceive whether he was ready to receive the suggestion that she craved to make.

During the evening both were very quiet. She had wheeled her armchair to the sofa where he lay, and stooped from time to time to kiss him. But her sympathy seemed empty to him without the words that he was yearning to hear; and to herself, till the words were spoken, the caresses that she could not restrain seemed almost an insult.

"When shall you sail?" he asked, breaking a long silence.

"When you are tired of me," she answered.

"Ah! You'll go before then!"

"Really?"

Digitized by Google

Coquetry appeared heartless to him. He wondered at her.

"For the first time I wish you were a nobody; I've been too vain, perhaps, of being loved by Rosa Duchêne. Now I'm punished for it—it's your position that comes between us. Her lover, or her career—what woman would hesitate?"

He did not know it, but in his tone was the reproach that was her clue. She shivered with joy before she spoke.

"I can't tell you what woman would hesitate," she said, with a laugh.

"What do you mean?" he faltered.

"Supposing——" she said, twisting a piece of his hair round her finger.

"'Supposing'?" he echoed, breathlessly.

"Supposing that once upon a time there was an actress who came to South Africa and met a man she was fool enough to like very much—to love very much—to love as *I* love *you!* Suppose they had meant to go to London together, and then,—one morning, learnt that the boy was too ill—that the woman must give up everything to stay with him, or go away alone and give up him? If through that first dreadful day she wasn't able to decide—if just at first she did hesitate; if she tried to stamp her love out, only to find that it was worth more to her than the stage,

Digitized by Google

than her Paris, than her life; if she cried to him, 'Willy, I'm ashamed! Forgive me, and let me stop!'—what do you think the man would say?"

"Rosa!" he gasped.

"I love you! I love you! I love you!" she muttered, straining him to her.

"You won't have so long to wait as you think —I shan't last more than three or four years, even here!"

"You shall live for ever," she swore; "you shall be immortal!"

They went, the following day, to view the little house that had delighted her so much. It was to be let furnished, and the old, white-haired negress that she had seen in the garden was prepared to remain as servant. They settled to take it then and there; and less than a week later they were installed.

The afternoon that they moved in, Polly went into town alone. She explained that there was something she wanted to buy—a shade for the parlour lamp; and Willy, who was vividly interested in the arrangement of their home although he could not see it, said, "Let it be a pretty colour, darling, something that'll make the room nice to look at in the evening!"

She left him on the *stoep,* where she would see him at the moment she reached the gate on her

Digitized by Google

return. But when her purchase was made, she did not hasten to rejoin him there. She turned up Adderley Street, instead, into an avenue. Near the foot there was a big building. It was the Public Library, and she entered it.

"Please," she said nervously to a gentleman who was standing behind the counter, "I want a criticism of a book of poems. It doesn't matter who wrote them, but they must be fine poems, and the critic must say that the poet's a genius. . . . Could you help me?"

The gentleman was taken aback.

"What kind of poet?" he inquired. "There have been many fine poets. . . . Do you mean a poet who is still living?"

"I really don't mind at all whether he's living or dead," said Polly, impartially, "so long as he's good enough."

"Well, we have just received a work that might suit you. . . . How would this do?" He handed her "Victorian Poets," by Stedman. "If you go into the reading-room you can look through it."

She clutched the fat green volume thankfully; and, taking a chair at one of the tables where there were pens and ink, hurriedly skimmed the contents.

The names looked promising. Tennyson, Browning, Swinburne—a host met her eye, in-

Digitized by Google

cluding dozens of whom she had never heard. To her impatience, however, it soon seemed that the author found more faults than merits in even the best of them; nowhere could she come across exactly what she sought.

At last, after infinite pains, she selected a lot of appreciative paragraphs and managed to dovetail them into a fairly consistent whole. But a panegyric on Byron, which she saw too late for it to be inserted satisfactorily, without her omitting a eulogy of Keats, detracted from her satisfaction.

"I'm very much obliged," she said to the librarian.

"Did you find what you wanted?" he asked curiously.

"Yes, thank you," she said; "at least, it'll do to go on with. But I shall often have to come again."

She now proceeded to the station, and she reached the garden as the sun was setting. Willy was still where she had left him. In her hand was a copy of a London paper—a paper that he had often referred to with awe and anticipation. She put her sheet of foolscap on the rustic table, and gave him the paper.

"Sweetheart," she said, "I've brought you your first review!"

Digitized by Google

He turned very pale; his voice was tremulous: "What do they say? What's it in?"

She told him the paper's name. "I'll read it to you."

She took a seat by the table, and read.

" 'The minor poetry of the last few years,' she began, 'is of a strangely composite order. We can see that the long-popular Browning at length has become a potent force as the pioneer of a half-dramatic, half psychological method, whose adherents seek a change from the idyllic repose of Tennyson and his followers. With this intent, and with a strong leaning towards the art studies and convictions of the Rossetti group, a Neo-Romantic School has arisen, in which Mr. William Childers, whose *Reveries* is now under our consideration, leaps at a bound into the foremost place. His songs resemble those of Rossetti in terseness and beauty, while with Browning they escape at times to that stronghold whither science and materialism are not prepared to follow. Art so complex as Mr. Childers' was not possible until centuries of literature had passed, and an artist could overlook the field, essay each style, and evolve a metrical result which should be to that of earlier periods what the music of Meyerbeer and Rossini is to the narrower range of Piccini or Gluck. All must ac-

Digitized by Google

knowledge that *Sic Itur ad Astra* is perfect of its kind. Take this and that exquisite ode, *To a Memory,* or *My Soul and I!* We call them poetry; poetry of the lasting sort, and attractive to successive generations. We believe that they will be read when many years have passed away; that they will be picked out and treasured by future compilers.' "

She paused, that he might breathe. Half an acre of Heaven had fallen into the Rondebosch garden and its glory was flooding him.

After a few seconds she bent again over her manuscript and read on, for several minutes, to the end.

When she had finished they did not speak. She lay her head on his breast, while his soul uttered thanksgiving on the heights to which her lie had lifted him. He had touched the pinnacle. He was thrilled with an intenser joy than comes to one man among millions—a joy so vast that few of us have the imagination to conceive it.

"Happy?"

" 'Happy'? You, and Fame! Could life give any more?"

The brief Cape twilight was beginning to fall, and she guided him inside. She led him into a chair, and kissed him—his lips, and his sightless eyes.

Digitized by Google

"Your chair in our home," she murmured. "Oh, and the lamp-shade! Here it is."

"What colour did you choose, Rosa?"

"It's *couleur de rose!*" said Polly. And she put it on.

Some months later, on the border of Mowbray and Rondebosch, there lingered, in the last weeks of his life, a famous poet. He had never spoken with his publishers, but from time to time they wrote to him—in terms of respectful admiration; and then the celebrated actress, who shared his exile and acted as his amanuensis, read their letters to him, and cashed the very small drafts that they apologetically enclosed. At the primitive shops from which the villa was supplied, its tenants were known as "Mr. and Mrs. Childers." But as they had not been seen at church, none of the neighbours had called on them, nor, in fact, did anyone suspect their great importance; and as the poet, being blind, was always attended by the actress, he made no acquaintance when he was out. He had just published his second work, which had enhanced the reputation won by his first. The volumes were beloved belongings; from the shelf on which they were kept he often took them down and fondled them. To a stranger, parting the expensive

Digitized by Google

covers, the contents might have been startling in view of so much pride; he might, indeed, have been pardoned the impression that he was looking at Mavor's Spelling Book, and a child's History of England; but the poet held them with rejoicing. To clasp them was rapture, second only to clasping his companion—a plain young woman whom he addressed by another woman's name, and passionately believed most beautiful.

Digitized by Google

THE CHILD IN THE GARDEN

WHEN he reached the village of Thergrimabes at last—and after Athens the journey had been extremely trying—the curate gathered that Miss Netterville was out. As it was six months since they had met, and he had written to her that he was coming, her fiancé was vexed.

The innkeeper had laid eager hands on the portmanteau, and the traveller signed to him imperatively to put it down. "No, no," he exclaimed. "I must sleep somewhere else—if there's another inn to be found in the hole!" He remembered that it was useless to inquire for one in English. "Upon my word," his thoughts ran, "it's most annoying! Of course, we can't both lodge in the same house, and none of these peasants will understand a word I say. How very tiresome, to be sure! Really, it's most inconsiderate of Gertrude to be out when I arrive. I shall have to be very firm with her; I see that I shall have to speak even more strongly than I intended."

It was midday, and the sun was blazing; the straggling white road baked under his dusty

Digitized by Google

boots. The heat, and the thought that Miss Netterville would probably return to luncheon—to say nothing of the difficulty of seeking accommodation without an interpreter—decided the curate to remain for awhile. "A lemon-squash," he commanded, at a venture, "bring me a lemon-squash!" And then, as the order produced only smiles and shrugs, he raised a hand to his mouth with a gesture which he felt to be rather Southern and graceful.

The landlord responded volubly, and though he brought wine instead, the Rev. Aloysius Chaysle was too thirsty and fatigued to make objections to it. He sat in a little vine-clad arbour, with the wine on a bench, and his portmanteau at his side, and was much inclined to wish that he had not left Bedfordshire. The situation was undignified from first to last, he felt. It was no less than three years now since Gertrude had promised to be his wife, and their marriage had been delayed by nothing but the scientific coldness of the young woman's disposition. When a girl who was betrothed to a Church of England clergyman, with private means, allowed him to pine for her in his parish while she devoted herself to the study of archæology abroad, it was time for the clergyman to put his foot down,

Digitized by Google

thought Aloysius. And that was what he had travelled from Bedfordshire to do.

Meanwhile, Miss Netterville was trudging along the road to greet him, with a frown on her intellectual brow. She was quite aware that she was treating him unfairly, and surmised pretty shrewdly what he had come to say, and it would all be a great bore. The idea of marriage had never attracted her at any time; Man—other than prehistoric—had always been rather repellent to her than the reverse: and she wondered why she had been weak enough to disturb her life by becoming engaged. She approached the arbour with no enthusiasm.

"Hallo, Al!" she said; "I didn't expect you so early. Have you been here long?"

"I've been here the best part of an hour," replied Aloysius. "It was disappointing to find you were not at home. Well, how are you, Gertrude? Aren't you going to kiss me?"

She inclined a cheek awkwardly—such physical expressions of good feeling were distasteful to her—and stared at the portmanteau.

"What did you bring your bag out here for?" she asked. "Why didn't you take it upstairs?"

"Upstairs?" echoed the curate. "It must be taken to another hotel! But I can't speak to these people—I had to wait till you came in."

Digitized by Google

"I'm afraid that there's nothing else resembling an hotel for miles," she said; "Thergrimabes is rather primitive, you know."

"It seems so primitive that I'm dismayed to find you in it; but, with all your contempt for the conventions, I suppose you don't want us to be talked about? Surely you understand that it's out of the question for us both to sleep under the same roof, in the circumstances?"

"Oh, my dear Aloysius," she cried, *"please!* Spare me the artificialities! Go to one of the goatherds' cottages, if any of them has a bed to offer and you care to lie in it, but don't talk to me as if I were an ingénue in Bedfordshire—I've got beyond that sort of thing. Have they given you anything to eat? Lunch'll be ready directly —we may as well go inside."

"Gertrude," he began strenuously, "I've something to say to you, and it's just as well to say it at once. Your letters haven't been very satisfactory—over and over again you've left a question of mine unanswered. We've been engaged for three years now, and I want you to fix a day for our wedding. Will you marry me next month?"

"Next month? Oh, no, it's impossible!"

"But why? Frankly, dear, I am losing patience. Why is it always 'impossible'? Mar-

Digitized by Google

riage needn't interfere with your work—you can write quite as easily when we're married as you do now."

"In Bedfordshire?" she said, with a fine smile.

"I don't approve of the tone in which you mention Bedfordshire!" exclaimed Aloysius. "I presume that a book may be written in Bedfordshire as well as in Thergrimabes, or in Egypt, or any other of the remote places that you've a craze for? The whole thing is preposterous. It looks a little like affectation. It would be preposterous for a girl of twenty-eight to roam about the world unprotected, in any case——"

"Unprotected?" she echoed, "unprotected? You are talking a language that I've forgotten. Really, your notions are the most antique things in Greece!"

"I say that it would be preposterous for a young girl to roam about the world alone, in any case—you might be robbed and murdered here—and considering that you're engaged to me, it's more preposterous still. It puts me in a very false position. And it's not an easy matter to explain. People have begun to talk."

"In Bedfordshire?" she inquired again.

"Yes, in Bedfordshire—and they would talk in Bloomsbury, or Belgravia, or anywhere else. It's not proper, Gertrude, it is thought very im-

Digitized by Google

proper indeed. You must remember that you are young and pretty, and——"

"Oh, don't!" she said wearily. "What an odious word! I'm not accustomed to consider my personal appearance, but I do trust that I'm not 'pretty.' "

"My sister often says that you would be extremely pretty," returned Aloysius, "if you didn't strain your hair back, and paid more attention to your clothes. But your prettiness is not the point; the main thing is our engagement—you haven't the right to behave like this, you aren't free to indulge your eccentricities, you owe a duty to Me."

Miss Netterville lit a cigarette, and gazed thoughtfully across a mulberry-tree. Characteristically, she had made no change in her costume on the day of her lover's arrival—and she had stated a fact when she declared herself indifferent to her appearance as a rule; but in spite of the ill-fitting blouse, the unbecomingly dressed blonde hair, in spite even of the coldly intellectual eyes, she looked a desirable woman. A psychologist might have thought she looked also a woman with potentialities. But Aloysius was not a psychologist; he saw only the obvious—and not the whole of that.

"Of course I am to blame," she said at last.

Digitized by Google

"I know. But then I never pretended to the kind of temperament that you admire. To me, my paramount duty must always be my work; to you, my paramount duty is to do the sort of thing that any other woman could do equally well. It is curious that I appeal to you. To be quite candid, love in its physical aspects is unpleasant to me, quite apart from the fact that marriage would be an abominable hindrance to my studies. I have no gift for domesticity; the prospect of district-visiting appals me, and tea-parties bore me to death. And I have no leaning towards maternity. I oughtn't to have promised to marry at all—I have more important things to do in my life. There are shoals of women capable of adding to the world's population, but the women capable of adding to its store of knowledge are comparatively few."

"You are expressing yourself very strangely," muttered the curate, "very strangely, indeed! If I understand you, you are breaking our engagement off."

"I don't want to be unkind," she said, "but I am quite sure that you ought to do better."

"That is a matter on which you must allow me to judge for myself—on which I did judge for myself when I proposed to you. I could certainly wish that you held more feminine views—

Digitized by Google

and that you did not express the views that you do hold with such unusual bluntness—but, for good or ill, I love you. You must admit that to break off our engagement after all this time would be to treat me cruelly? I really don't know what I could say to people!"

"You could say that you had given me up—everybody would consider you were quite justified."

"I am not in the habit of telling falsehoods, Gertrude; I should have to acknowledge that you had thrown me over—at the end of three years, after I had travelled to Greece to see you; I had looked forward to a tenderer conclusion to the journey, I must say!" He, too, regarded the mulberry-tree. "I—I am not unreasonable, I quite appreciate your interest in your work—archæology is a very interesting subject, I am sure, and——"

Miss Netterville made a gesture of impatience. "Please don't patronise the Ages! You mean well, but it's irritating."

"I was about to explain that if next month would be inconvenient to you on literary grounds, I would cheerfully wait until the month after," said Aloysius, with pained surprise. "Let us both make concessions—let us say in two months' time! Eh, dearest? We have both let our

Digitized by Google

tongues run away with us, haven't we—both been a little hasty? What do you say? You shall share my study—you shall have your own shelves in it. Only the other day I was looking at a little bamboo desk in the High Street, and thinking how admirably it would suit you. *I'd* write my sermons while *you* wrote your book, and sometimes we might turn round and read each other what we had done. Wouldn't it be cosy, now? Doesn't it sound pleasant?"

She shuddered, and nerved herself for a supreme effort.

"Al!" she stammered, "it has been a shocking mistake; I can't marry you."

And the curate did not sleep anywhere at all in Thergrimabes—he left it the same evening. When he bade her "Good-bye," he said, "I have released you from your promise, Gertrude, because you forced me to do so; but I shan't cease to long for you, and if you ever change your mind, you must let me know. Think things over after I have gone—I shall always be hoping to hear from you." Then he climbed into the crazy vehicle, and was jolted over the white road again—a disconsolate figure beside the portmanteau that had not been unpacked—and Miss Netterville went moodily to her work.

Thergrimabes consists of its dilapidated inn

Digitized by Google

and a sprinkling of hovels. Half-naked children swarm in the dust, and beg of any misguided tourist who happens to stray there from the towns beyond; goatherds, dignified in their rags, roll cigarettes pensively, and prematurely old women occasionally appear at the doors and shade their eyes in the sun. These are almost the only signs of activity in Thergrimabes. For the rest, you have silence and the mountains.

Miss Netterville made many expeditions up the mountains; equipped with a scribbling block and a fountain pen, she often wrote among them. One evening—she had now written thirty thousand words, and Aloysius had been gone about a month—she heard the slow sound of hoofs. Two quaintly garbed men were riding down the track. They had evidently just observed her, and as she turned, one of them waved his sombrero to her, with an impudent smile. He was the taller of the pair, a swarthy, handsome fellow, with laughing eyes, and a big moustache that curled above full, sensual lips. She bent over her manuscript again with a frown, wondering why his glance had affected her so queerly.

The men quickened their pace, and then dismounted and advanced to her. Her emotion was pure fear now; she got up, trembling.

"There is nothing to do—she is alone!" said

Digitized by Google

the smaller of the two, a weedy villain, with a squint.

"You will find you have more to do than you think," she boasted, coolly; "I am armed."

"So you understand Greek, do you?" exclaimed his companion. "That's all the better—I like a girl to be able to talk to me! You are going to have a ride with me, my beauty. If you don't come quietly, I shall have to be rough! How is it to be?"

He learnt how it was to be at once; Miss Netterville struck at the handsome face straight from the shoulder—throwing her body into the blow with capital effect—and took to flight as he reeled back. But the next instant he rushed after her; he seized her before she had covered a dozen yards. Now there was no chance to strike him—an arm flung round her held her fast, and she could only scream for help. He swung her off her feet, and stumbled with her towards the saddle. His labouring breath was in her face, but his eyes laughed into her own, though the blood that she had drawn was trickling round his mouth. As he rode off with her, crushed against him, she could feel the heaving of his breast under her cheek. They rode some distance with her cheek strained against his breast before he spoke.

Digitized by Google

"*Anathema ton!* What a spitfire you are!" he panted. "Look what your fist has done! Don't you think you owe me a kiss for that?"

"You brute," she gasped, "I'd like to kill you!"

"You're a regular devil of a woman—I didn't know they made them like you with that coloured hair."

"You're hurting my arm," she moaned. "I can't bear it any longer."

"Will you sit still if I don't hold so tight?"

"I couldn't escape even if I jumped off."

"That's true," said the brigand, "but I don't want the job of getting you up again; if I had your weight in gold, my dear, I'd lead an easy life!" He slackened his grasp a little, and flashed his bold, impudent smile at her—the smile that had shamed her so hotly when she first saw him. "Come, it's not disagreeable to be hugged by a man? Own up! It would be very shocking if you could help it, but you can't; remind yourself that you're not to blame, and then you can have a good time!"

"Where are you taking me?"

"To my hotel," said the facetious outlaw.

"What do you mean?"

"Call it a 'cave' if you like—I'm not proud, and I have a fancy for a quiet spot. But there's room enough for you in it—and food and wine.

Digitized by Google

We'll have a bottle together. Don't look so frightened. I'll release you safe and sound when the ransom is paid, I take my oath."

Miss Netterville stared into the twilight. She might tell him that there was no one to ransom her; but if he believed the statement, he would probably be reckless how he treated her, she thought; her only safeguard was to leave him the illusion that her safety would be paid for heavily.

"How much do you demand?"

"I shall open my mouth jolly wide. You are a pretty woman—you would be very vexed if I put a low price on you!" He broke into a roar of laughter, and clasped her more caressingly.

His good humour was not without a reassuring effect. The scoundrel was very human, and her horror of him had partially subsided. Indeed, as they rode on in this close embrace, she marvelled that she could bear the ignominy of it with such fortitude.

It was a long ride; her thoughts wandered in it, and curious fancies crossed her mind. She thought of Aloysius, and wished that he were different. It occurred to her that it would be pleasant to be clasped to Aloysius like this—always with the proviso "if he were different"—and then she reflected that the ride itself would be pleasant if the brigand were a gentleman, and

Digitized by Google

their embrace were right. Insensibly she yielded to it more and more. It grew less repugnant to her, and even—— With a shock she realised what she had been feeling, and shivered with self-disgust.

"We have arrived," said the brigand; he carried her inside. "It is nice to carry you, now that you don't struggle," he added.

On entering, she was plunged into darkness so intense that she could discern nothing whatever. Then she found herself borne into a cave illumined by pendant oil lamps, and furnished with considerable comfort. Beyond was a second cleft of light, and she perceived that the cave resembled a suite of rooms communicating with one another by means of apertures in the rock. The man who had assisted in her capture rejoined her now, and three others appeared, who saluted her with quiet satisfaction. There was no excitement, no hint of violence; to her surprise, her reception was as formal as if she had arrived at an inn—as formally as innkeepers the brigands prepared to keep her prisoner.

Excepting the captain! The captain, as has been seen, did his business with bonhomie. If not "the mildest mannered man that ever cut a throat," at least he was the most jovial. No gallant ever filled a lady's glass, or peeled her figs

Digitized by Google

with more consideration, and when he told the company how valiantly she had defended herself, he testified to her prowess with so much humour that she couldn't restrain a smile.

At the same time, it was with no little trepidation that she found herself alone with him again when the meal was finished. It proved necessary, to confess that she had no friends in Greece with whom he could communicate, and, moreover, that none of her friends in England was in a position to ransom her; he twirled his moustache thoughtfully when she explained.

"No lover?" he questioned. "Rubbish, you mustn't tell me that you have no lover—a woman like you!"

"It is true," she declared.

"Nor a husband?"

"No; I was to have married, but I changed my mind."

"*Diable!* he had no blood in his veins, or he would have carried you off, like me. Well, it seems that I have made a bungle, eh? Women are all liars, but every man is a fool once, and I believe you. So I have had a punch in the face for nothing? That's a nice thing!"

"I have a watch on," she suggested; "you can take that if you like." It was a little Swiss watch

Digitized by Google

that had cost thirty shillings. He looked at it, and gave a shrug.

"Is that what you offer me to let you go? I think you are worth more."

"I have nothing else to offer. Besides, although I haven't any friends to pay a ransom, there are plenty of people to miss me; the search might not do me much good, but it would probably end in your being shot. As you can't hope to make any money by me, you'd be wise to set me free."

"You have brains, too, under that lovely hair," he remarked, appreciatively. "May I offer you a cigarette?"

"No," she said; but she eyed the packet wistfully, and wished that her case were in her pocket.

"Now you are being a little donkey! Why should I wait to drug you with a cigarette when I could tap you on the head with one of these?" He touched the pistols in the sash wound round his sturdy waist. "You see I am smoking them myself—take your choice among the lot!"

Miss Netterville and the brigand smoked in silence for a few moments. Then——

"Every man is a fool once," he repeated meditatively, "but there must be a limit to his folly. If I set you free like this, what sort of ass would

Digitized by Google

you think me? No better than the wooer who let you change your mind!"

"I should think you had acted like a brave and generous fellow!"

"Ah, you want to flatter me into it, you cunning cat!" he said. "Do you know that I could love you desperately, my beauty with the yellow hair? I believe I fell in love with you when I felt your fist! I like you for having hit me—I should like you to hit me again. Come and hit me again, beauty with the yellow hair—or sing me a love song. Do you sing?"

"No," she murmured.

"It's a pity, for you are a passionate woman—you would have sung well. Why did you start?"

She had started to discover that this bandit knew her better than she had known herself until an hour ago. "I didn't start," she answered.

"Fire has no heat, and there is no water in the rivers; all things are as the right woman says," he rejoined. "So you did not start, beauty, though you have shaken the ash of your cigarette on to your knees! Well, *I* will sing to *you* instead. I will sing at your feet, while my poor comrades have only their cards to play with. It is good to be the captain sometimes—it is good to-night."

He twanged the strings, and broke into a sere-

Digitized by Google

nade. The deep voice was untrained, but rich and sweet. After the first surprise, Miss Netterville forgot who it was that sang—it was an artist on the stage, a lover below a window; almost it was her own lover, whom she loved! The music knocked at her heart, and no trace of the smile that discomfited her so much was on the handsome face now—sentiment idealised the ruffian.

When he finished she was very pale.

"Are *you* as cold as the woman of the song?" he whispered.

"Yes," she muttered, "I *am* as cold."

"You lie," he cried, "you love me!" And the next instant she snatched a pistol from his sash.

"I'll kill myself!" she gasped.

She thought her wrist was broken as she dropped the weapon. He picked it up and paced the cave with agitation, smiting his chest, and ejaculating. Meanwhile, the English lady marvelled why she didn't loathe him.

"Will you go?" he exclaimed, suddenly. "You shall go now, if you wish it; I swear you shall be guided back. I love you, I adore you, I implore you to stay! Do you wish to go?"

She bowed her head—"I wish to go."

He called to the men, and she heard their wonderment, their departing footsteps—at last the clip-clop sound of hoofs outside. All this time

Digitized by Google

the captain had stood brooding silently; now he raised his head, and she saw with emotion that tears were in his eyes.

"Good-bye, *zoe mou,*" he said.

"Oh!" she faltered. "Did you *really* love me then?"

He opened his arms, and Miss Netterville gave herself to them with impetuous lips.

"All is ready for the lady!" came the shout.

"They are waiting for you," said the brigand sadly.

"There—there's no hurry for a minute," Miss Netterville heard herself reply.

Before she left him he assured her that her escort might be trusted; and no mishap befell her on the road. But she had lost her nerve; a few days later she returned to England, and—perhaps she no longer considered protection so superfluous—she married Aloysius the following month, though he did not deem it necessary to inform him of her adventure.

They have been married for some years now, and get on together as well as most people. Aloysius has obtained an excellent living, and the eldest of their children is a little son, who engrosses his mother's attention to the exclusion of archæology. If it were not for her son's favour-

Digitized by Google

ite game, the vicar's wife might think less often of her strange experience; but the boy tilts his straw hat like a sombrero, and sticks a pop-gun in his sash, and pretends that the summer-house is the "brigands' cave." At such times, Aloysius remarks humorously that "a little brigand is inappropriate to a vicarage garden." And the lady's eyes are wide.

Digitized by Google

A LETTER TO THE DUCHESS

"You said to me last night, Duchess, 'You are a great musician, Socoloski, but a great musician may be a great fool!' I had vexed you. If I should not know that, forgive me; perhaps it is common of me to recognise that I vexed you—I shall always be ignorant of the best manners. Pray be indulgent to my ignorance, pray let me write to you boldly, because I have something to say.

"But how difficult it is—I am a vulgarian, who can express himself only by his violin! I want to say that when you looked at me so kindly, I was not the dolt and ingrate that I seemed; I was very proud, very honoured. If I appeared insensible of your interest, it was because I had just been stricken by a grief which I dared not hint.

"I arrived at your house late last night. You will be revolted to learn what delayed me. When my recital was over, and I had escaped from the fashionable ladies who scrambled to kiss my hands and pull buttons from my coat as keepsakes, I hurried to a minor music-hall to hear a girl in tinsel sing a trashy song. I hurried there

Digitized by Google

because I loved her, Duchess, and I had much to think of when I left. To understand what was in my heart when I reached your drawing-room, you must read my love-story from the beginning —my very vulgar love-story that will disgust you.

"Most of the things that you have seen about me in the papers were false—anecdotes invented by my agent. The public ask for anecdotes of their favourite artists, and it is business to give the public what they want. I generally play the music that they want, though it is seldom the music that I like best. I say that most of the things you have heard about me were false, but this much is true—my father was a peasant, and I have fiddled in a fair.

"I was happy. I have been told of artists who suffered agonies in their youth, always tortured by ambition and dismayed by their obscurity. With me it was quite different. I was more joyous in a tent than I am now on the platforms. I even knew at the time that I was happy. That says much! Ungrateful, perhaps I sound to you? Still, I shall be frank.

"I was thirteen when I first heard the words, 'You will be famous.' I was on my way to buy some apples, and the discussion that detained me bored me a great deal. So ignorant was I, that I

Digitized by Google

swear to you 'Fame' said no more to me than that one day I should fiddle with a roof of wood over my head, and that storekeepers and farmers would spell my name from a bill at the doors.

"My patron had me educated. To him I owe, not only my position in the musical world, but the fact that I am able to write this letter. I shall not weary you by describing the years of study. When I began to understand what lay before me, my apprenticeship looked an endless martyrdom; more than once I was at the point of fleeing from it. There is, they say, a special department of Providence for the protection of fools; it is Providence, no wisdom of my own, I have to thank that I am not still a vagrant scraping to villagers among the show wagons. The plans mapped out for me succeeded in spite of myself; at last the time arrived when it was said, 'Now we will commence!'

"Of course, I had come to my senses before this. So far from hankering after the tents of my boyhood, I was ashamed to remember that I had ever played in them; so far from picturing Fame as the applause of shopkeepers in a shed, I thirsted for something more than the reception accorded me at my début. Ambition devoured me now. If I have the right to praise myself for

Digitized by Google

anything, it is for the devotion with which I worked during the five years that followed.

"Well, I made a furore. Audiences rained roses on me and struggled to reach the platform. Great ladies invited me to their receptions, and bent their eyes on me as if I were a god. I found it frightfully confusing; under my veneer, under my fashionable suit, I was still the peasant who had held his cap for coppers. I discovered that it was necessary for me to do more than master my art—that I was required to say interesting things to people who frightened me; my popularity suffered a little because I could not do it. The agent was furious at my bashfulness. 'You must speak to the ladies as if you were in love with them,' he told me; 'or if you cannot do that, be rude! Make an effect *somehow*. You answer as if you were a servant.'

"Many of my eccentric remarks that you have heard, Duchess, have been composed with difficulty, and practised with care. The world will not have us as we are. My agent often returns a portrait-poster of me to the printer, with the instructions, 'Put more soul into the eyes'!

"I am coming to my love-story. It was no further back than last year that I first met her. I had given a recital at Blithepoint, and was re-

Digitized by Google

maining there for a few days' rest. One evening I went to a variety entertainment in the pavilion on the pier.

"In the bill were three girls described as 'The Three Sisters Clicquot.' They appeared as theatre attendants—the programme sellers who show you to your box—and sang, to a rather plaintive air, that they once hoped to be stars themselves. And then, having blossomed into gauze and spangles, they burlesqued melodrama. After their turn, two of the trio came into the stalls, and, by chance, I spoke to one of them; a Strong Man had broken a sixpence in halves, and thrown the pieces over the footlights—the girl asked me to let her see the piece that I picked up.

"I do not suppose I exchanged twenty words with her, and certainly I gave no thought to the incident; but a night or two later I drifted on to the pier again, and came face to face with her after the performance was over.

"She greeted me gaily. 'Hallo! Have you been in front?'

" 'No,' I said; 'I am only strolling. Where are your sisters—are they really your sisters?'

" 'Oh, no,' she answered. 'It's Nina Clicquot's show—good name to choose, eh? The other girl, Eva Jones, and I are engaged by her, that's all.

Digitized by Google

This is my card.' From a battered purse she took a card on which was printed:

Miss Betty Williams

The Three Sisters Clicquot

"We were near the entrance to the buffet. 'Will you come and have a drink?' I asked.

" 'Oh, I don't think I will, thanks,' she said. 'I'm waiting for Eva—I might miss her.'

" 'Oh, you'd better come,' I said.

"We went in and sat down at one of the tables. She did not strike me as particularly good-looking then; the spell of her face lay in its changefulness, and as yet I had not seen it change, for her capabilities as an actress were of the slightest. I saw merely a pale, slim girl, becomingly dressed in some dark stuff that was rather shabby; when she lifted her brandy-and-soda, a finger-tip showed through a glove. I wondered why I had brought her in, and was glad that there was no crowd to recognize me. It wasn't till she told me so that I was sure she recognised me herself.

"She said, 'I have never heard you play; I

Digitized by Google

should love to! Did you get many people in down here?'

"I couldn't help smiling. Yet it had a pleasant ring, that question. It revived the past—the days when I used to see the takings divided on the drum.

" 'Oh,' she exclaimed, laughing, 'I forgot! Of course you did—I'm not used to talking to big guns.' But there was no embarrassment in her apology—she might have been living among 'big guns' all her life.

" 'How long have you been at it?' I asked her.

" 'The halls? Three years,' she said. 'I was on the stage for a little while, not that I was up to much. I was the starving heroine once—the manager said I was the worst leading lady he had ever seen, but that I "looked the part," because I was all bones. I *am* a skeleton, aren't I? I chucked the stage; the halls pay much better—and my voice isn't bad. Of course, it's not a trained voice, but it isn't bad, eh? We have two shows a night next week—that means five pounds to me. Good for little Betty!' By the way, she was not little.

" 'What do you do with so much money?' One must say something.

" 'Oh, I've plenty to do with it,' she said.

" 'A husband to keep?'

Digitized by Google

" 'Give us a chance!' she laughed. 'No, but mother doesn't make much by the shop any more —she's a costumier—and there are the kids to bring up—I've two young brothers. She did well once;. I used to go up West, to try for engagements, dressed to kill—she lent me the models to put on. I often didn't have twopence in my pocket, but I looked a treat. The only thing was, I was so afraid of its raining—then we couldn't sell the model.'

" 'You've had hard times?' I said, interested.

"She nodded gravely. 'Rough! I've always found very good pals, though. When I went into the chorus at the Regalia, I and a friend of mine hadn't a cent between us for bus fares; and there was an old Johnnie—one of the syndicate —who took to us. Quite straight! He said, "Look here, I know you two girls aren't getting enough to eat; I've booked a table at the Troc, and you're both to lunch there right through the rehearsals. If you can't get away for lunch, it's to be dinner; but one square meal a day the two of you must have regularly, or there'll be rows. Mind, it isn't to be a meal for more than two!" ' Her face lit with laughter. 'There were some boys in the chorus just as stony as we were; my friend would lunch one day, and I'd lunch the next—we'd each take a boy in turn! But the

Digitized by Google

old man found out what was going on—and the Troc was off! . . . I've had cases of champagne sent me, if you please! He was a wine merchant's son—wanted to marry me; his screw in the business was about a pound a week. Nice little fellow. He always called me "Jack." He used to say, "I can't come in the pit to see the show to-night—I haven't got a bob; but have a case of champagne, Jack! I'll send you one round—it doesn't cost me anything." '

"I liked it. For years I had conversed with only two kinds of women—the women who awed me, and the women who were awed. In five minutes I was as spontaneous as she. Her tones were, for the most part, very pleasant, and now that she was animated, the play of her features fascinated me. When we had finished our drinks we sauntered round and round the pavilion.

" 'The performing birds are on,' she said, as we caught the music; 'I hate that show, I hate an audience for standing it. Don't they know it's cruel? Performing birds make me think of the first bird you see die—you're a child, it's generally the first time you've looked at death. You bury your bird in the garden, and you line the grave with flowers, so that the horrid earth shan't touch it.' Her voice fell to a whisper.

"By the burst of applause that reached us in

Digitized by Google

the moonlight I knew that the pavilion was packed.

" 'That's Heracles, the Strong Man,' she said, as we listened again. 'What did you think of him? He's in love with my "sister"—I mean Eva Jones. He wanted to kiss her, and she put on side—oh, Eva was very haughty! "Sir, how dare you?" He had hold of her finger, and he drew her to him as if she had been a piece of paper—it was so funny, to see her going. He worships the ground she walks on, fact! That was the reason his challenge night was a frost—didn't you hear about his challenge night? He bet that no twelve men in Blithepoint could pull him over the line. Then he got drunk, because she wouldn't have anything to do with him—and they pulled him all over the place. It cost him ten pounds, besides his reputation. He cried. "Ah, little girl," he said to her, "it is all through you!" '

"It was amazing, that on the stage she could not act. As I heard her tell this story, I would have sworn she was a born comédienne. The exaggerated dignity of Miss Jones, its ludicrous collapse, the humiliation of the Strong Man, she brought the scenes before me. 'Go on,' I begged, 'talk some more!'

"But before she could talk much more, the

Digitized by Google

obdurate Miss Jones appeared. I was presented, and wished them 'Good-night.' I could have seen them to their lodging, but—well, Miss Jones's attire was not to my taste, and she had forgotten to take the make-up off her eyes.

"I am writing more than I intended; I had no idea that my explanation would be so long!

"The next night I did walk to their lodging with them. It was Saturday, their last night in the town; on Monday they were to sing in a London suburb. Miss Jones had to leave a parcel with an acquaintance at the Theatre Royal, and, in her absence, Betty Williams and I paced the street alone. A quarter of an hour, perhaps. She was looking forward to the week at home. She was serious to-night; she talked to me of her mother and the 'boys.' I said I hoped she would find them well; and we shook hands—'Good-bye.' The incident seemed closed, but I went away with an impression I had never experienced before—the impression of having met someone who ought to have been my very good friend.

"When I breakfasted on the morrow, I felt blank in realising that her train had already gone. Every day I had to combat a temptation to run up to that suburb. When my holiday came to an end, I wondered if she was in town still. By a music-hall paper, I ascertained that The Three

Digitized by Google

Sisters Clicquot were in Derby. Each week I bought the paper to learn the movements of The Three Sisters Clicquot; and each week I told myself it would be absurd of me to follow her so far. Eventually, I followed her to Yorkshire.

"What a town! The grey grim streets, the clatter of the clogs, the women's hopeless faces under the shawls! I put up at a commercial hotel—there was nothing else—and was directed to the Empire.

"Their name was far down the programme: 'Number 10: The Three Sisters Clicquot.' I began to think that we should never reach it. Number 8 proved to be a conjurer, and my heart sank as I beheld the multitude of articles that he meant to use before he finished. Number 9 was a troupe of acrobats; a dozen times they made their bows and skipped off—only to skip on again and do some more. At last! The number '10' was displayed; the little plaintive symphony stole from the orchestra, the three girls filed on—Eva Jones, next Miss Clicquot, then Betty.

"I wondered if she would notice me. I saw her start—she smiled. I was so pleased that I had gone! We talked presently, in the passage under the stage. She was very much surprised; I did not tell her that I was there only to meet her again. Once more I walked with her and Eva

Digitized by Google

Jones to their door. In the morning I called on them.

"I stayed in the place four or five days. There were luncheons in the private room that I had been able to secure at the hotel. I went to tea with them at their apartments. In fine, I was very much in love, and I knew that I had been a fool. I knew it for a reason which will be difficult for you to credit, Duchess; this girl, who took a brandy-and-soda with a stranger in a bar, who accepted little presents from others, and dined with men who had only one motive for inviting her, remained perfectly virtuous. In different classes there are different codes—she did not regard her behaviour as wrong; more, if she had committed the act which she knew to be wrong, she would have broken her heart. 'No matter how much a man cares for a girl,' she said to me once, 'he can't hold her any more sacred than she holds herself at the beginning. A girl saves herself for a man she is thinking of; she hasn't seen him—in all probability she never will see him; but she is saving herself for him—the imaginary man—from her head to her heels! . . . You tell me I "shouldn't do this," and I "shouldn't do the other"—I don't do any harm. If you knew how dull it is on tour, you'd understand my taking all the fun I can get. When a

Digitized by Google

fellow asks me to lunch, I go; I say I'll go with another girl—that tells him everything, doesn't it? I swear to God I've only let one man kiss me in my life—and then I only did it out of pity, because he was so cut up. A man is never dangerous till he's beaten. Do you know that?' Well, I was not prepared to marry her, and she could be nothing to me if I didn't; I left Yorkshire with the firm intention of never seeing her any more.

"However, I missed her dreadfully, and at the end of a month, I succumbed again. I went to Lancashire this time. The same impatience in my stall, the same quiver of expectancy at the plaintive introduction that was so familiar now, the same throb as the three girls appeared. Why should I bore you with details? I was with her all day, every day. Tea and chatter in the lodging became an institution, and we grew serious only when the melancholy dusk signalled her departure for the hall. She was not fascinated by her career: 'How I hate going in!' she murmured sometimes, as we reached the artists' entrance, with the group of loafers spitting on the kerb. And I sat in front, just to see the turn, and talk to her again between the first performance and the second—in the passage at the foot of the dirty steps, where such draughts

Digitized by Google

poured through the slamming door, and the gas-jet blew crooked in its cage.

"She was fond of me; I knew it. I had only to ask her to marry me—I knew that her consent wouldn't be due to my position. There were moments when I was very near to asking her. But I was Socoloski, and she—a third-rate variety artist. I shuddered to think what the Society ladies would say if their god stooped—for that matter, what everybody would say. No woman could have been more different from the wife I had pictured. Yet no woman had ever been so truly a companion to me. Always a bohemian at heart, I had naturally fallen in love with a bohemian; but when he draws a portrait of the wife that he desires, every man is conventional. Besides, you, and great ladies like you, had made me a snob. She drove with me to the station on the day I left. She knew I wouldn't go to her again—I heard it in her voice. That was the only time I felt dull when I was with her—we both could have said so much and were allowed to say so little. I remember the look in her eyes as the train crept from the platform. I shall always remember the look in her eyes as she smiled on the platform!

"Even a weak man may be strong sometimes—in the wrong place; I stuck to my resolve. At

Digitized by Google

first, I still glanced at the *Encore,* just to know where she was, but before long I denied myself this, too. My American tour started soon afterwards. The change helped me while it lasted, but when I came back the struggle was as bad as ever. Six months had passed, yet every day I hungered to see her. I was desperate. I didn't know what to do to keep myself in hand.

"Duchess, my motive in addressing you is to write the truth, even the truths that one blushes to acknowledge. When I welcomed the dawn of your interest in me, I turned to you as a chance of forgetting *her*—I did not mean to prove so obtuse as I appeared last night. Perhaps, a gentleman might have seized the chance, too, but, I suppose, only a cad would own it to you afterwards.

"And I couldn't forget! I never responded to your gaze without wishing it were hers. I resented the very gowns that you received me in, because *she* was poorly dressed. I hated myself for being in your drawing-room while *she* was trudging through the rain.

"My God! it's awful to think like that of a woman—to have the thought of her beset you as you open your eyes in the morning; to think till you're worn out with thinking of her, and pray

Digitized by Google

to think of something else; to think of her till you want to escape from your own mind!

"Tolerate me a little longer—I have nearly done!

"Last Saturday, it was a year since I had seen her. I broke down—I was ready to make her my wife. I wondered if she would look as pleased as she used to look when she saw me—and then I froze at the thought that The Sisters Clicquot might be abroad, that they might have vanished altogether. When I searched the *Encore* again, I—— There were emotions!

" 'The Three Sisters Clicquot'! I found it. They were in Portsmouth on Saturday; yesterday they were to be in town. It was impossible for me to go to Portsmouth; my prayer was that, after my recital yesterday, I might reach the London hall before she left. I had no means of knowing whether their turn would be late or early; all through that recital I was torn with the fear that I might miss her. The audience delayed me beyond endurance—I was trembling when I escaped from them. I stumbled into the carriage, and told the man to drive like mad.

"He couldn't find the stage-door, and, too impatient to keep still, I leapt out and went to the box-office. It was all right, they hadn't been on yet! There could be no chance to speak to her

Digitized by Google

until the turn was over, so—just as I used to do—I sat down to wait in the stalls. Just as I used to do, I read the name of 'The Three Sisters Clicquot' in a programme and wished that the preceding turn didn't last so long.

"I had taken it for granted that they would be giving a different song now—and my heart tightened at the greeting of that familiar symphony again. For an instant I could not look at the stage. I knew, with my head bent, the moment when the three girls filed on; I knew where they were moving, how they were standing—now the note that they were going to sing! I looked up for Betty's face—and saw a stranger.

"Oh, the horrible woman, the low, horrible woman! And I had to watch her, I watched her in spite of myself. The audience laughed and shouted while I sat there with the sickness of terror in me, while I watched that horrible woman posturing in Betty's place, and wearing the frock that Betty had worn.

"Afterwards, I found the artists' entrance, as I had proposed to find it—only I asked for Eva, instead of Betty. She came down to me, smiling, in her stage costume.

" 'Who'd have thought of seeing *you!*' she exclaimed, as we shook hands; 'I was just going to change.'

Digitized by Google

"'How are you?' I said dully, and our eyes questioned each other.

"'I suppose you know about Betty?' she said.

"I could only look at her.

"'She's dead,' she told me.

"The last turn was on—a comedian was bellowing doggerel. I listened to bars of it before I whispered, 'Dead?'

"'She got typhoid when we were in Lincoln—she died last month. Hadn't you heard?'

"'No. . . . It's still "The Three Sisters Clicquot" on the bills.'

"'Oh, yes, of course—it's always "The Three Sisters Clicquot." . . . The new girl's not as good as Betty was—do you think so?'

"'I don't know.'

"The comedian was dancing now—I heard the rattle of his feet. Shabby, pasty-faced men kept hurrying past us through the passage, up the dirty steps; the door at the top was slamming, and the gas-jet blew crooked in its cage. It was strange to be among these things and not see Betty.

"'Good-bye,' I said. 'Did she ever talk of me after I went?'

"'Sometimes. She wasn't the girl to say much. Betty liked you, though.'

"'I liked Betty,' I said. . . . 'Well——'

Digitized by Google

"'Well,' she said, 'I must get along and change. Buck up!'

"And then I went to you, your Grace; I had promised to play to your guests, and I could not break my word. But you may understand what I was feeling while I played—that my thoughts were in a grave. And when we were alone, you may understand that, though you are charming, and beautiful, and a duchess, and exalted me by your caprice, I could not be guilty of that—outrage, that adultery towards the dead.

"Most humbly I beg you to believe that I am grateful for the honour you have done a man who was unworthy—who was loyal neither to you nor her. You will never pardon me for this letter. Good-bye."

Digitized by Google

THE PRINCE IN THE FAIRY TALE

"The carriage is at the door, Madam." How strange that still sounds when the solemn butler says it—to me, Rosie McLeod! I go, wrapped in furs, down the great staircase, pass the two footmen—whose pomposity, if I may own the truth, rather frightens me—and enter my carriage in a dream. For a few minutes my grandeur seems unreal; I am remembering winters when I used to shiver in a spring jacket, and japan my summer straw. I feel as Cinderella must have felt on her way to the Ball, and, indeed, I hold my history no less fairy-like than hers, and my hero no less charming than her Prince. I want to write the tale, and to think that, far away in dear old England, other girls will read it. I ought to explain that I am writing in New York, a city that I never expected to see in all my life. But let me begin at the beginning!

The beginning, then, was a draughty flat in West Kensington. In looking back at it I see

Digitized by Google

always a delicate, sweet-faced woman sitting by the fire, and a dark slip of a girl sketching at a table covered by a faded green cloth. The woman was my mother; the girl was I. I know now that I had very little talent, but I meant to be an artist. When I sold my copy of "Shoeing the Bay Mare" one morning, while I was working at the National, I was prouder of myself than I have ever been since. Pray don't think I am vain of it now; copies of that were rather easy to sell, and the girls in my time were accordingly eager for their turn to begin it; I only mention the matter because it was the first and the last money that my mother saw me earn. Dear little mother! But we were very happy together, weren't we, although we were poor? Dear little mother, if you were living to-day, what lovely, lovely things you should have! . . .

At her death I was left quite alone. It is true that I had some second cousins, but I had not met them, and they showed no desire to meet me then. From one source and another I had about three hundred pounds, and in my ignorance I expected to support myself by my brush before the sum had melted. When I was free of the flat I took a lodging in Bayswater, and continued to study at a life-class. Excepting that I worked,

Digitized by Google

and hoped, and very often cried, there is nothing to tell you of the next two years.

Then one afternoon I saw Miss Niblett in Kensington Gardens. She was an artist who had long been an acquaintance of ours. As far back as I remember she used to drop in to tea about twice a year, and talk of the great things she was going to do. She never seemed to grow any older, nor to do the great things. She was a spirited, chirpy little woman, and when she settled in Paris both my mother and I had missed her occasional visits very much. In the Broad Walk she greeted me as brightly as ever, and we strolled to the Round Pond, and talked for an hour. She was returning in a week's time, and I heard that she was living there in the cheapest possible way, occupying a studio and bedroom in the quarter called "Montparnasse," and marketing and cooking for herself. She told me of the great things she was going to do.

"Why don't you come back with me, child?" she asked presently. "Come and study in Paris, and then you won't be so lonely. Wouldn't you like to?"

"I should love it," I faltered, with a heart-thump, "but——"

"But, what?"

Digitized by Google

"I don't know. . . . For one thing, I can't speak French."

"Tut," cried Miss Niblett. "Hundreds of the girls don't speak French. You'll learn." For a minute we sat silent, gazing at the toy ships sailing across the pond. Then she added briskly, "You had better come!"

"All right," I said. And that was how I went.

Yes, I went to study in Paris, and to live in the queerest fashion imaginable. Our rooms were up ninety-eight stairs of a dingy house in a dilapidated court. At six o'clock in the morning the court used to wake, and be so exceedingly busy—and cheerful withal—that anyone there would have been ashamed to lie abed. To begin with, there was the rushing of water outside, for tap there was none, and one by one the tenants clattered to a pump with a bucket, to obtain their supply for the day. Then the hawkers made their appearance, each with his own peculiar chant. "It arrives, it arrives, the mackerel! Who wishes for my fine mackerel this morning?" And "The mussels! the mussels most delicious!" And "Some milk—some fresh milk?" And I mustn't forget the noise that was made by shaking out the rugs from every window. I have never seen a city that opens its eyes so good-humouredly as

Digitized by Google

Paris. In pictures it is always shown to us at night with its myriad lamps shining, or in the afternoon when it is frivolous, and its fountains flash; but, in my own little unimportant opinion, if one would know Paris at its sweetest and its best, one should get up very, very early, and behold it smiling when it wakes to work.

I have told you that we lived up ninety-eight stairs; I must tell you something about the people who lived on the lower landings. Of course the lower the landing, the higher the rent, but none of our neighbors had an air of opulence, need I say it? All of them bustled to the pump with pails, all of them cooked their own meals; and it was rather a rare occurrence, I believe, for everybody in that house to cook a dinner on the same day. On the floor below ours there was a madame Troquet, who painted fans and chocolate boxes for a livelihood—the expensive and gorgeous boxes covered with satin, which fortunate people have sent to them at Christmas, and on their birthdays. Still lower there was an American youth who was studying Medicine. I am afraid he did not study it very hard; I should be sorry to think that if I were ill in America one day, he might be called in to prescribe for me. Lower still there were two young French-

Digitized by Google

men; one of them wrote verses, and his companion made sketches for some of the papers. And —there was another American, who had moved in while Miss Niblett was in London. So good-looking!

He was about seven-and-twenty, and, oh! he was shabby. It made my heart ache to see the threadbare clothes he wore, even there where I had come to take threadbare clothes for granted. I used to meet him at the pump sometimes, and then he always insisted on carrying my pail for me. I felt horrid to let him do it. I guessed he didn't have enough to eat and needed all his strength to drag his own pail up the stairs. Not that he showed any signs of weakness. He would mount beside me as gaily as if he liked the work and the bucket were no more than a feather-weight. He seemed quite strong and happy, and —— I have told you how nice-looking he was, haven't I?

A girl cannot allow a young man to carry a pail of water up ninety-eight stairs for her without thanking him. I mean it was impossible for me *just* to say "Thank you," as if he had handed me the toast, or picked up my sunshade. Of course we spoke as we went up the stairs. He told me he was an art student, like me, and I

Digitized by Google

thought that no poor young man had ever been more courageous and contented with his lot—if one call a little a "lot." He talked as if he loved the life. To listen to him one would have imagined that poverty—"bohemianism" *he* termed it—was a kind of treat—a privilege for the Select, like a ticket for the Royal Enclosure. I used to forget to pity him till I looked at his coat.

"I think you are very brave," I couldn't help saying once.

"Brave?" he exclaimed. "Why, how's that? Where's the hardship? I think it's just the right thing for a man to carry home his bread for breakfast, and dine for a franc when he's flush. It's glorious—teaches him to be independent. And you?" he went on in a different tone. "Is it very hard for *you?*"

"Oh, I am one of the wealthy—for the time being," I laughed. "I have quite a fortune as yet."

"What shall you do when you have squandered your millions?" People did not stand on ceremony with one another at our pump.

"Paint," I said.

"Nobody to help you?" he asked.

"My own right hand," said I.

He regarded it ruefully. "The prospect is not

Digitized by Google

so charming as the hand," he murmured, "is it?"

"It's glorious," I declaimed, "for a girl to carry home her bread for breakfast, and dine for a franc when she's flush."

"No, it isn't," he said. "For a girl it's a different thing altogether. You'll excuse my contradicting you? Besides, even a franc wants earning when you have no allowance from home."

"I shall sell my Work," I declared valiantly. In those days I always spelt my work with a capital W.

"I guess pictures take a deal of selling sometimes."

"I suppose you mean that you don't think I shall ever paint well?"

"I haven't seen anything you have done," he answered; "how could I mean that? . . . Here we are at the top!"

We had reached our door, and Miss Niblett was standing there, a stiff little figure of disapproval. Considering that I was only showing the young man simple civility in return for his extreme kindness, I am bound to say that Miss Niblett's later remarks were absurd. Miss Niblett said she should go downstairs with the pail herself in future.

When she came up the next morning I was

Digitized by Google

all ears. Was she alone? . . . No, I could hear her speaking; and then there were steps, as someone turned away. "That Mr. Martin is certainly polite," she said, as she entered; "he insisted on bringing it up for me."

"*Who* did?" I inquired loftily.

"That Mr. Martin," she repeated. "Who else do you suppose would take the trouble?"

"Oh! *I* didn't know his name *was* 'Martin,'" I explained. "You seem to be on very friendly terms with him."

"Tut," said Miss Niblett. "Don't be ridiculous, child, and make haste with the coffee, do!"

Though I did not meet Mr. Martin at the pump any more, I very often chanced to meet him on my way home from the art school. Each time I liked him better, and of course I knew I wasn't doing all the liking myself. He never *said* anything, but a girl can always tell, can't she? When I heard of the shifts that some of the young men in the house were put to for a meal, and thought that his *straits* must be as cruel as any of them, I could have cried. There were moments when food almost choked me, as I pictured him sitting half starved in his room, his chin sunk on his breast. I never saw him with his chin sunk on his breast—never despondent in any

Digitized by Google

way—but I was sure his buoyancy was just put on to hide his sufferings.

When I had been living in the court for about two months, the sight of his coat, and the idea of his privations, proved too bad to be borne. We had become such comrades by then—for the walk from the school took a long time, especially if one didn't walk very fast—that I thought he would let me speak like a sister to him.

"Mr. Martin," I murmured one day as we went home, "I want you to do me a great favour, please."

"Why, certainly," he said. "Right now! What is it?"

"Well," I said, "we are both students, and we are very good friends, and it's all nonsense for you to reply that because I'm a girl you can't regard me as a real chum." And when I had stammered that, I turned red, and gazed at the tips of my shoes.

"But I haven't replied anything of the sort," he said, with a laugh; "I'm waiting to hear what you want me to do."

"You won't be offended?" I asked.

"I'm sure I could never be offended with *you*," he said earnestly.

"Or hurt?" I added.

Digitized by Google

"I'm sure *you* would never hurt me."

"Well, then, I want you to let me lend you a little money till things are better. Will you?"

His eyes widened at me; and then he—blushed. He did, he blushed; I saw the colour spread right up to his temples. I hated myself, though I had done my best to say it all delicately.

"I am very, very grateful to you," said Mr. Martin. "Believe me, I'm not in need of money. But you're a chum, indeed."

"Oh, you're too proud to confess," I gulped—and there was a lump in my throat that I couldn't swallow.

We were crossing one of the bridges, and I stopped and looked at the sun sinking, while I tried to blink my tears back. He stood there by me, and was quiet for a minute. When he spoke, I hardly recognised his voice, it trembled so much.

"Will you tell me something?" he whispered.

I nodded.

"Why did you say this to me?"

"Because I know you are poor, and *I'm* poor and can understand. But I could spare a small sum easily, and I thought you'd be great enough to let me help you."

"You *have* helped me," he answered; "helped me to ask you a question that I hadn't the pluck

Digitized by Google

to put. . . . Dear little chum, do you care for me?"

"Yes," I told him.

"Enough to wait till a pauper can afford to marry you?"

"Yes," I told him.

"I love you," said Mr. Martin, "with all my heart!"

And the boats were sailing down the river, and a crowd was on the bridge, but I couldn't see them. In all Paris there was no one but ourselves. We were alone in the sunset—he and I!

I knew what Miss Niblett would say, and she said it—"Tut!" She warned me that I was doing a rash, an improvident thing. And after she had reproached herself for bringing me to France, and prophesied a hopeless waiting and the workhouse for me by turns, she hugged me splendidly, and wished me happiness. There you have Miss Niblett!

Then my fiancé was invited up to supper, and we were merry. I was annoyed to see that, while I was making the salad, she had examined him about his prospects. Of course I did see it, when I came back, by his embarrassed look and Miss Niblett's air of dissatisfaction. Still I repeat that we were merry that evening, although I could not help regretting that I had so often

Digitized by Google

spoken to her of my fear that he didn't get enough to eat. It wasn't quite nice, while we sat at supper, to think she was reflecting that a substantial meal was by way of being a novelty to my lover. It hurt me, that.

Good little Miss Niblett! Though she had let me prepare the supper so that she might have a chance to pester him with questions, she made amends by clearing the things away herself. And shut the door behind her! That was the first time he kissed me. After all that has happened since, the scene remains clear and living to me—the little lamp-lit room, half studio, half parlour, the scent of the mignonette in the open window, and the Promised Land I saw beyond. When I am old and grey, it will be living to me still—his voice, his touch, and the joy that was singing in my heart.

And by-and-by we all went out. "I have pennies to spend," pleaded my lover, "let's be lavish!" Could I be wise on such a night? Away we sped from Montparnasse into the Paris where the cabs darted and the cafés glittered; and we had syrups and fizzy waters under the trees in the starlight, and made believe that we were rich. I thought Miss Niblett must have been in love herself once upon a time—she was so tactful. It was a long ramble that we took. Like children we

Digitized by Google

joked outside a jeweller's window, pretending to choose the costliest of engagement rings; like vagrants we loitered by a great house where a reception was being held. Yes, we stood there on the pavement and watched the grand people arriving; and for the first time for hours I remembered we were poor.

"Why aren't *we* going to a party? How lovely it would be!"

"Are you keen on parties?" my lover asked. "Perhaps I could take you to one this week. Shall I try?"

"A party like that?" I laughed. "Yes, please!"

"Ah, well," he replied, "I can't guarantee that it will be quite like that. Still, I guess it will be rather fun. Will Miss Niblett go, too?"

"I?" she exclaimed. "Don't talk nonsense!"

"I wonder," he said, "which is the best place in this city to hire a suit of dress-clothes for the evening. My social gaieties have given me no cause to find out."

That was all. We turned homeward. I thought with Miss Niblett that he had been talking nonsense. Imagine how surprised I was to hear him revive the subject after a day or two.

"Well, it's all right," he said; "I've managed it. We're invited."

"Invited?" I echoed. "Invited where?"

Digitized by Google

"Why, to the festivity to-morrow night."

"But," I cried, "you didn't really mean it, did you? You didn't suppose I'd go? The people are strangers to me."

"Oh, that's nothing," he answered. "In Society they often go to strangers' parties. It's rather chic."

"Well, we aren't in Society," I reminded him. "I'm not chic. I can't go junketing with a lot of students I've never seen before."

"You'll never be a bohemian, Rosie," he said; "you don't seem to catch on to the tone of the quarter at all. Now, do come! If you're a good girl you shall be rewarded. You see I have my clothes ready, and it would disappoint me some not to get a chance to show 'em off."

He made such a point of it that I promised. But I wasn't pleased. Besides being reluctant to intrude, I was annoyed at the thought of having put him to expense. Also the idea of his going to a party in a hired suit was distasteful to me. I went to my school as cross as two sticks.

Early the next morning he ran upstairs in a great hurry to borrow our newspaper. I wondered why he wanted it, for he always read *Le Matin,* and we took *The New York Herald.* However, we were busy, and let him have it, though we hadn't looked at it ourselves yet. We

Digitized by Google

were busy examining the white silk frock that I meant to wear. I was for freshening it with some new tulle, and Miss Niblett kept saying that it would be folly to spend the money. The argument lasted such a long time that I didn't go to school at all that day. Miss Niblett won.

And then behold an afternoon of amazement! As I was boiling the kettle, there came a rap at the door, and whom should I admit but a stylish young woman with a note and a large box! The note consisted of four words—"Frills for the Fairest," and the box contained—a dress. But, my dears, a dress that I can't describe to you! I should need a page to do it justice; such a dress as the fairy godmother might have created when she changed a pumpkin to a chariot.

"What does it mean?" I gasped.

"Is that from him?" stammered Miss Niblett.

"Oh, don't you know it's from him?" I cried hotly. "Now I see why you wouldn't let me buy the tulle! But how can he have paid for it, and how could you encourage him?"

I thought she was going to cry. "Rosie," she whimpered, "he told me he wanted to give you a dress, and asked me to help him, but I never imagined he meant a dress like that; I didn't indeed! How could I? Oh, my child, look at the name on the lid—look where it comes from!"

Digitized by Google

"Mademoiselle will try it on?" suggested the young woman coolly.

"*What* does she say?" I demanded. She spoke French, of course. It is to be hoped she didn't understand English.

"She says you had better try it on."

"This is madness," I faltered. I looked from the young woman to Miss Niblett; I looked from Miss Niblett back to the frock. "Madness!" I repeated—and tried it on. Oh, what a frock! There were exclamations, and pins, and stitches. And in the middle of it all came another bang at the door.

A porter in uniform stood on the landing. He, too, bore a note and a box; he, too, behaved as if miracles happened every day in the year.

Four words again—"Suède for the Sweetest."

Gloves, if you please!—a stack of them with I can't tell you how many buttons, and the faintest odour of violets. I know now that in the whole of Paris there is only one shop that sells gloves quite like those; and that they are famous all over the world.

A knock at the door! By this time we opened it speechlessly—we just glanced at each other, and tottered. And again four words—"Bonds for the Best." I tore off the brown paper with

Digitized by Google

hands that shook. Under the brown paper, tissue paper; under the tissue paper, the glint of velvet, pale blue; I drew out a jewel case; I pressed a spring, and——

"Oh, gracious!" screamed Miss Niblett.

Shimmering on the satin with which the case was lined lay a "rope" of pearls fit for an empress. Not even a string—a "rope"! Three times round the neck it would wind, and hang almost to the waist. We fell on to the sofa, dazed.

"Are they real?" Miss Niblett panted. "Oh, my dear! Give me the case. My dear! They *are* real, I'm sure they are. Oh, my dear! they must be worth thousands upon thousands of pounds. What *does* it all mean?"

And for the rest of the day not a glimpse of my fiancé, not a message from him. Monsieur Martin was out, the concierge told us when we inquired. It had been arranged that he should come for me at ten o'clock, and at half-past eight I began to dress. We lit every candle in the flat that evening. At five minutes to ten I was ready —all but one glove. We sat trembling with curiosity. Then we heard him—singing on the stairs; and he tapped as the hour struck.

"Now!" we both cried. "Perhaps you'll explain?"

Digitized by Google

If his clothes weren't his own, he had discovered a remarkable establishment; I noted that, despite my dizziness. I fancy I have mentioned how nice-looking he was, but I had never really done him justice before. He was worthy to take his frock out. He stood there admiringly, presenting a bouquet.

"Explain?" he murmured. "Oh, you mean those things I sent you? My dear ladies, patience is one of the most beautiful of virtues—let us cultivate it! Rosie, you're a dream of loveliness. I thought perhaps you'd like a few flowers. Shall we go?"

And we went. I had expected to see a cab at the corner; there was a brougham, with a footman waiting on the kerb.

"Not mine," said the Man of Mystery, "I assure you. Hired."

"Like your clothes?" I flashed.

"Much more so," he said serenely. "Would you prefer the window up, or down, dear?"

"Either," I said, "if you'll tell me where we're going."

"Why, to the party," he replied; "I thought you knew."

"You don't ask me to believe we're going to a student's supper, dressed like this?"

Digitized by Google

"Well, no," he said. "I guess we'd be a trifle overpowering, eh? But I never told you it was a student's supper. That student was an invention of your own."

We rolled along luxuriously. To my bewilderment, it seemed that all the capital was astir that night. Crowds, crowds everywhere in the brilliant streets—Paris was a panorama of lights and faces. After a while we began to move more slowly, other vehicles impeded us. I could hear the jangling of horses' bits, the orders of the police.

"We're drawing close," said my lover.

The clatter of hoofs was to right and left of us now. From the window I saw the glare of carriage lamps, caught glimpses of great ladies' gowns and jewelled heads. The brougham swung through gates into a courtyard.

"We are there," said my lover.

I stood on the steps of a palace. On either side of me soldiers were drawn up, startling, spectacular. Music swelled through the doorway. Flunkeys bowed at our approach.

"Where have you brought me?" I whispered. "Whose house is this?"

"He's called the President of the French Republic," was the answer. "Don't be shy."

Digitized by Google

We passed through the dazzle of the hall. The lights blinded me, and the scent of the roses was very strong. I heard great names spoken, names that made me catch my breath. As those awe-inspiring names were uttered, the scene became more and more unreal. And the guests, the guests who bore the historical names, looked quite ordinary, prick-me-and-I-shall-bleed persons. I think that was the most vivid impression I had in the Elysée—the difference between the persons and their names.

Soon through the throng—among the regal toilettes of the women, and the groups of distinguished, "decorated" men—I grew conscious of the figure of an elderly gentleman, with iron-grey hair and a rather sad smile, moving near to us. I recognised him by the photographs that I had seen—and I knew it was the President himself.

"Now," said the voice at my side, "I'm going to present you to him. Try to look as if you liked it."

For an instant I saw the other end of the glittering salon turning very, very small and dim, and I thought I was going to faint. I hadn't the slightest notion whether I ought to put out my hand to him, or kiss *his* hand, or sweep a curtsey. And if you want to know which of the

Digitized by Google

three I did, I'm unable to tell you; but my lover affirmed afterwards that I was "real charming" —and you may take his word for it, if you are kind enough. I can't pretend that it convinces *me,* for I never felt such a gawk in all my days.

I don't know how long we stayed at the Elysée; I have a vague recollection of eating an ice. But the next thing I remember clearly is our entering the brougham again, and driving away into the fresh sweet air. Then I leant towards him.

I said, "If you've any consideration for me, you'll answer right off and tell me whether I'm awake or asleep. I have pinched myself three times, and I'm still not sure."

"You darling!" he laughed. "I was afraid you'd read it all before I confessed; that was why I stole your newspaper."

"So you did!" I exclaimed. "Why are you in the paper?"

"Well, you see, my Rosie Posy, I bought those pearls for you yesterday," he said, "and I had to get the bank to identify me; I suppose the jewellers chattered last night." He took the paper from his overcoat, and there, if you can believe me, by the light of the little electric lamp over our heads, this is what I saw:

Digitized by Google

"AN AMERICAN MILLIONAIRE'S SON IN MONTPARNASSE!

MR. MARTIN MCLEOD PLAYS AT POVERTY!!

THE EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIMENT OF A YOUNG CRŒSUS!!!"

After that, what remains for me to tell you? What his father said? Well, his father didn't object to me a bit, and always declares that Martin's marriage was the most sensible action of his life. Though that's nonsense. We spend six months of the year in America, and the other six in Europe. Miss Niblett is still in Paris. I am afraid she will never do the "great things," but she will never be hard up any more, for my "prince" is as generous as he is rich. The story I have tried to write is finished. *Isn't* it as marvellous as any fairy tale? But it is true! And I wonder if any other woman has ever been so blessed as I, and thank God for my great happiness.

"The carriage is at the door, Madam."

Oh, is it indeed? Well, I am not going out just yet, for there is a little girl running across

Digitized by Google

the room to say that "Mother has been writing long enough, and must come and play." And there's Martie—Martie with his arm round me, looking down in my face.

Digitized by Google

WITH INTENT TO DEFRAUD

He wished he were dead. It was not a phrase, a verbal extravagance; he wished it. The only time that he was free from anxiety was when he was asleep. His days were full of hard work, and disappointments, and efforts to make civil words do the duty of money; and it often occurred to George Collier, when he lay his head on the pillow, that if no to-morrow morning came to disturb him, it would be a blessed state of things. He was a writer of humorous books.

When he married Eva, he had been nine-and-twenty, and sanguine, though his humour did not command big prices so far. The critics were very kind to him, and Eva was very admiring; and he went on writing patiently. But by degrees he saw that his confidence had been premature. And then he saw that his marriage had been premature. And then a child was born; and he gave up his ideals and sank to pot-boiling, and the pot-boiling did not make the pot boil very violently, either.

A baby added to his embarrassments a good deal. The long-clothes seemed no sooner bought

Digitized by Google

than it needed short-clothes; and before he had recovered from the cost of these, it had grown out of them. The nurse appeared to lie awake all night thinking what she could ask for next, and she was a superior person, with imagination.

To-day there were school fees to be paid, and Eva was no longer admiring, and their address was Pandora Road, Balham. The little house to the right was called "Broadlands," and the one to the left was called "The Towers"; and Collier, in a fit of moroseness, had labelled their own house, "The Hut," and made enemies among the neighbours.

Yes, Eva's sympathy had worn out, like the cheap drawing-room carpet. Balham and Tooting had got on her nerves, perhaps; or George, the failure, was a different man from the popular humorist with whom she had pictured herself driving to brilliant receptions in fashionable gowns. Anyhow, when he reflected that there had been a time when secretly he wrote poetry about her, he turned hot.

She was a pale, slight woman, with grey eyes and fluffy hair, and a red flannel dressing-grown in the morning. After luncheon, when she made her toilette, the grey eyes acquired a soulfulness that came out of a phial, and nobody would have suspected the tart and vulgar reproaches that

Digitized by Google

could fall from her lips. Had she been what she looked, he thought sometimes, contemplating her wonderingly when an acquaintance was present, his courage wouldn't have deserted him so soon. But, if he had confessed that she weighed on him, the acquaintance would have considered him an unappreciative brute; she looked too wistful, and delicate, and fragile to weigh on anyone.

He was forty years of age, and soberly and deliberately he wished he were dead. Only one thing deterred him from making away with himself in a painless fashion; it was the knowledge that he would leave her and Chick unprovided for.

This was his frame of mind when he came to project a fraud. He saw his way to dying comfortably while safeguarding Chick and Eva from want. That is to say, he saw his way if he could raise the money necessary to pay the premium; he proposed to assure his life and commit suicide.

The curious part of it was, that he had always been a very scrupulous man, "as honest as the day"—that day that nobody remembers. He had never wronged anyone by so much as sixpence, and could have confronted a cross-examination without a tremor. People had often said that he was "too conscientious to get on." Yet

Digitized by Google

now he was meditating robbery on an extensive scale and barely perceiving his defection.

A man whom he knew very well, and who frequently dropped in of an evening, was Mr. Horace Orkney, a solicitor. George was not sensible of any strong esteem for him, but—perhaps for that reason—Orkney looked the likeliest person for what he wanted; and one afternoon he betook himself to the gentleman's office.

"I have," he said, when greetings had been exchanged, "come on rather delicate business. I needn't tell you that what I am going to say is in confidence."

"Quite so," said Orkney, playing with the ends of his moustache.

"The fact is, things aren't going well; I'm deadly tired of it all, and—— Well, the truth is, I'm anxious to make away with myself."

The lawyer was only thirty-six, and he started.

"To make away with yourself? Oh, nonsense!"

"I mean what I say," insisted Collier; "don't imagine I'm talking through my hat—I haven't come here to waste your time. But my life isn't assured. You see the difficulty. I've got to think of my wife and child, and they'd be practically penniless."

"Assure it," suggested Mr. Orkney, with a

Digitized by Google

shrug; "I should certainly assure my life, in any case, if I were you. But, my dear Collier, do let me dissuade you from such a—such a—— 'Pon my word!" He pulled out his monogrammed handkerchief, diffusing an agreeable odour of white rose. "You upset me very much."

"I won't trouble you with my arguments; I haven't come to make a sensation, and be talked round, and that kind of thing. My mind is made up, and I know my own mind better than anybody can tell it to me. You say, 'assure'; the point is, I can't assure, because I can't put my hands on the money."

"Oh," said Orkney. "What did you think of assuring for?"

"While I am about it I want to make a proper provision; I want to arrange for an income of, say, four or five hundred. For them to get as much as that, from a safe investment, the premium would be pretty stiff. A year's premium would come to—well, I reckon it three hundred and twenty pounds. Now, my idea was——"

"Was—what?" asked the solicitor, blandly.

George was nervous. His gaze wandered.

"My idea was, that you might be willing to advance the sum, with a view to doing me a turn, and making a bit at my death. I—I'm eager to make the proposal as attractive as I can. If

Digitized by Google

you'll let me have three hundred and twenty, I'll fix up my Will at once and leave you a thousand. What do you say? I think it's fair."

Horace Orkney tapped his fingers together pensively.

"One likes to do a pal a turn, of course, but ——What company are you thinking of, anyhow? You seem to overlook the fact that in a case of suspected suicide——"

"I've overlooked nothing—I've thought it all out, and I know exactly what I shall do. A cousin of my wife's has a cottage in Kent, on the Darenth. We've often stayed there. The lawn slopes to the river, and there's an Indian canoe. No more solitary place could exist. Now, I can easily contrive so that we get an invitation to go down for a week. One evening after working hard all day, I shall say that I'm going out for a breath of fresh air; I shall ask what time they're going to have supper, and set my watch by their clock, so that I 'mayn't be late.' I shall ask my wife to remind me of something I have to do in the morning, and skip through the window in the highest spirits. Well, the canoe upsets. Everybody knows I could never learn to swim."

"But your intentions may change, my friend! And if they do, where are my three hundred and

Digitized by Google

twenty pounds? In the natural course of things, you may live for thirty or forty years."

"I thought," said Collier, "of waiting till the spring; but if you don't think it'd look suspicious, the accident can occur next month. There's not much risk of my intentions changing in a month!"

There was silence.

"I'll turn it over in my mind," said Orkney, at last. "Now you must let me send you away; I'm busy."

Having turned it over in his mind, he agreed. He provided George Collier with the sum of three hundred and twenty pounds to take out a policy, and George made a Will by which Horace Orkney was bequeathed one thousand. The rest was left to Eva, who, to give her her due, was an affectionate mother.

The humorist was now comparatively content. It was already November, and he was to die in April. He had had hopes that Orkney would pronounce it safe for him to take the step earlier, but on reflection Orkney had said that the spring would be best, after all.

It was a disappointment, but George was too grateful to complain of a crumpled rose-leaf. He had borne the slings and arrows so hopelessly that he told himself he would be a rotter to kick at five more months; he was not unreasonable.

Digitized by Google

And, as the weeks wore away, his satisfaction increased. He was a weary man looking forward to a perpetual holiday.

There was a serious epidemic of influenza in London that year. Everybody who could afford to do so was flying to the watering-places, or the Continent; and among those who remained in town and were laid low, was Mrs. Collier. This was at Christmas.

The doctor did not, at the beginning, regard her case gravely. But she got worse, in spite of his optimism, and after a fortnight in bed she died.

George was inexpressibly shocked. Though he had long since outlived his illusions about her, she had been his wife, his daily companion. To realise that she was gone dismayed him. He remembered the girl, and shed tears at the grave of the woman. Not analysing, not drawing the distinction, but just grieving honestly.

After she was buried, as he sat in the quiet parlour, smoking at night, it occurred to him that as the child would now be doubly an orphan, he must arrange where she was to live when April came. In the circumstances she would be an heiress, and he wanted her to be suitably brought up. Fortunately, he had a maiden sister who could be depended on to carry out his wishes in

Digitized by Google

this respect. He nodded thankfully, reflecting how much troubled he would have been for Chick's future otherwise.

And January came to an end, and February began. And February waned; and it was March.

George was surprised to note how rapidly time had passed since the funeral. He put "March 1st" at the top of a letter very slowly, and sat looking at it with startled eyes. A month more, and the consummation would be reached. Poor little Chick, he would have to leave her!

Oddly, now that the end of it all was so near, he felt less eager than he had done. He had been conscious of late, of a certain enjoyment in life—a new enjoyment. The quiet parlour, with his pipe, and a novel, had been pleasant. He had gone up to his room at night without a groan, and seated himself at his desk in the morning with an unfamiliar zest. Only a month! Well, let him make the most of it!

But that was easier to say than to do. Death no longer figured in his thoughts as a perpetual holiday; now that he was a widower, it figured as a skeleton, and thrust itself into the cosiest hours. Perhaps Chick was on his knee and he was stroking her hair—and the skeleton clanked. Perhaps he was writing, in the small hours, interested in his work—and the skeleton mocked

Digitized by Google

him. What was the good of Chick's love, when he had to leave her directly? What was the good of revising a chapter, when he would be bones before the book was done?

He shuddered. It was no use blinking the truth; the fact was, the conditions had altered. He would have been a cheerful man to-day, for all his pecuniary worries, if he had been allowed; and the worries themselves looked less formidable, somehow. Eva had made the worst of everything, and—Heaven forgive him!—had always been a muddler. It was amazing what a difference her removal made. He was satisfied with life now, and—he knew he did not want to die.

At last he determined to go to Orkney and beg to be released. It was an odious task, but the alternative was more obnoxious still; and he went.

Orkney looked at him in blank disapproval when he had stammered to a conclusion.

"This is very unbusiness-like," he said, "very unbusiness-like indeed You put me in a most awkward position, Collier. I don't want to see you die, of course—I—I hope I have a heart—but an agreement is an agreement, and I have pressing need for a thousand pounds. As it happens, I've got a bill——"

Digitized by Google

"You see," said George, helplessly, "there's the child! I don't like to leave her alone in the world."

"I thought you told me, at the time of your wife's death, that she could go to an aunt in Dorking?"

"Yes; I did. But—— Well, I'm very fond of her. The parting is devilish hard."

"I don't see why it should be any harder this morning than when you came here and made your proposal. I did a friendly thing for you, and I must say this isn't at all fair treatment. It wasn't an agreement that I could enforce, you know—I relied on your honour. And now you put me off with empty excuses."

"Don't say that," faltered George. "To tell you the honest truth—I don't know how it is—since I lost my wife I—I'm not so depressed. I feel lighter, and there's a different aspect to things. I can't explain it."

"No!" said Orkney, firmly, "I won't hear it. I won't have the blame laid at the door of that poor little woman. This is cowardly, Collier. Be a man and say that you've changed your mind and are trying to back out."

"Very well, then," replied George, "I've changed my mind. I want to live, and to pay

Digitized by Google

you the thousand pounds as soon as I can get it together."

The solicitor smiled finely.

"It was a very fair rate of interest for the time agreed upon. But for a period of years —— Anyhow, we needn't discuss the point! So far as I understand your position, there would be very little prospect of your repaying even the principal."

"In other words, you won't consent?"

"I regret," said Orkney, "I regret very much that you should have put such a suggestion forward, because I am *unable* to consent to it, and it's a peculiarly painful one to refuse. I don't think it was delicate of you, Collier; it wasn't good taste."

"'Good taste' be damned!" said George hotly. "Finally, you insist on your pound of flesh?"

"Finally," returned Orkney, rising, "I repeat that if you're a man of honour, there's only one thing for you to do."

He touched the bell, and George slunk out into the street.

It was April already; he had either to break his undertaking, or to fulfil it without delay. Instinctively he saw the literary value of the situation. But the humorist felt no desire to treat it

Digitized by Google

humorously. He found himself, on the contrary, perpending it as an experiment in realism.

To the devil with literature! He must die or tell Orkney that he was going to sell him! Which should it be? One course was ghastly, and the other was disgraceful.

He vacillated hourly for a fortnight. And Orkney, meanwhile, seemed ubiquitous. George could not take a walk without meeting him; and Orkney always stopped and spoke, and asked him very coldly how he was.

George used to struggle for composure, but not with success. Then the solicitor would elevate his eyebrows and sigh significantly; and Collier went his way, feeling despicable and ashamed.

"The Pound of Flesh," "To Be or Not to Be," —what a lot of titles suggested themselves for the story that might be written! The thought of it obsessed him; and one evening he actually began it. The impulse was foolish, but the occupation was fascinating, and he wrote with unaccustomed ease. He treated the subject in a serious narrative.

At one o'clock he came to a point where he had to determine what the end was going to be. *How* was it to end? He rose and paced the room, refilling his pipe. He could not light it—it was

Digitized by Google

blocked. He wasted five minutes on it, fuming. If he didn't smoke, he couldn't think.

Formerly he had annexed his wife's hairpins in such emergencies; and, as a last resource, it occurred to him that, if he searched in the wardrobe where her belongings had been put away, he might find some hairpins.

The key was on his own key-chain, and he went upstairs. The dead woman's trifles had been laid on the shelves. He saw her work-basket, and her dressing-case, and the set of brushes, with "E" on the backs in silver, that he had given her on her last birthday. There was a hat that she had been trimming when she was taken ill, with the needle still sticking in it.

He paused. Momentarily, what he was doing seemed sacrilege. Then he opened the dressing-case and lifted the tray.

There *were* hairpins scattered at the bottom. There was also a bundle of letters, tied with ribbon, and directed in a handwriting that looked familiar. George stared at it. Was he making a mistake, or—— What on earth had the correspondence been about? He turned white, and pulled the ribbon off.

The dates that the letters bore were of the last two years. There was nothing criminal in them; but they were a man's confidential communica-

Digitized by Google

tions to a woman he loved. They spoke of the writer's "sympathy," of his regret that he could do nothing to "alleviate the dreariness of her life." There were frequent allusions to what "might have been." And they began, "Dearest Mrs. Collier," and were signed, "Yours with devotion, Horace Orkney."

George stumbled out of the bedroom and returned to the parlour; he sank into his chair there, with knitted brows, pondering. After a while he picked up his pen again; but he did not continue the story. He wrote:

"DEAR SIR,—I restore to you herewith certain letters of yours, for which I have no use. I perceive that the late Mrs. Collier's untimely decease frustrated your hope of marrying a widow whose natural attractions would have been enhanced by the possession of nine thousand pounds, and I tender you my condolence. The bequest in my Will will stand. But, as you once pointed out, I may, in the ordinary course of things, live for forty years longer. Believe me I have every intention of doing so if I can."

And he did, and became a very successful man.

Digitized by Google

DEAD VIOLETS

"If you ever want me, write to me—I'd come to you from the end of the world!" he had said; and she had answered, "I shall always want you, but I shall never write, and you must never come." She was married.

It was in May that they parted; they parted on the day of her owning that she cared for him. The virtue was hers, not his; yet because he loved her, and realised that she was too good a woman to defy her conscience and be happy, he acquiesced in her decision—refrained from pleading to her, refrained from trying to see her again.

His only indulgence was to send violets to her home in Paris for the ninth of December; the ninth of December was her birthday, and violets, she had once told him, were her favourite flower. He did not scribble any greeting with them, did not even enclose a card; he was sure that she would know who sent them, and it lightened his pain to feel that she would know. Indeed, to recall himself to her thus mutely was a joy, the only joy that he had experienced since the day of the "good-bye"; almost it was as if he were

Digitized by Google

going to her, that moment in the London florist's when he held the flowers that would reach her hands; she did not seem so lost to him for the moment, the separation did not seem so blank.

The next year, also, he sent violets for the ninth of December. His emotions it is true, were less vivid this time, but he was glad to show her that he was faithful; besides, the prettiness of the reminder pleased him.

And the third year he sent them chiefly because he felt that she would be disappointed if he appeared to forget.

So it had grown to be his custom to send violets to her for her birthday, though what was once an impulse of devotion was now a lie—the weakness of a sentimentalist reluctant to wound a woman, and his self-esteem, by admitting that he had exaggerated the importance of his feelings. And each December the woman had welcomed the lie with smiles and tears and believed that he loved her still.

When five years had passed he met her again. It was in Bond Street, and he had sent the violets to Paris two or three days before.

"Phil!"

As he turned and saw her, he thought how much better-looking she used to be. She was young still, no more than thirty, but she had

Digitized by Google

longed for him on every day of the five years, and her tears had blotted some of the girlishness from her face. As he turned and saw her, the woman thought how his mouth had twitched when he said, "I'd come to you from the end of the world." It is among the unacknowledged truths that sentimentality may create as much ferment as enduring love, and he had suffered even more violently than she, though he had not suffered so long.

"What are you doing here in December? You're the last person I should have expected to see," she said.

"I go South to-morrow."

"Lucky man!"

"And you?"

"We're living here now."

"Really? You've left Paris? How long?"

"We've been here since October; we're flat-hunting."

"Oh!"

They stood looking into each other's eyes, neither knowing what to say next. Her heart was thumping terribly, and she felt very happy and very frightened. More than once she had been tempted to write to him that her courage had broken down; all resistance seemed to have left her as she stood looking into his eyes again.

Digitized by Google

"Flats," she added in a voice of composure, "are so abominably dear in London."

"Where are you staying?"

"In apartments—Bayswater."

"Bayswater must be a change from Neuilly? It was a jolly little place you had in Neuilly!"

"It was rather jolly, wasn't it? My—my husband's people wished us to come over; they thought they might put him into something over here. Of course, in Paris it was cheap, but there were no prospects."

"I understand."

"There's some talk of a secretaryship if a company is floated." It was so natural to be telling him everything now they had met. "It would be a very good thing for us."

"I hope it'll come off."

"Yes. . . . Well, how are you? I'm always seeing your name—'one of the novels of the year'!"

"They aren't so good as the novels that nobody read."

"Not quite. Why?"

"I'm turning out what's wanted now. One has to live."

"Yes. . . . Still, isn't it a pity to—to——"

"Oh, one gets tired!" he said. "Ideals make

Digitized by Google

lonely dwelling-places. . . . Let me take you somewhere and give you some tea."

"I ought to go to some shops; I'm up West to work."

"'Work'? Spending money?"

"Earning it—I'm doing fashion articles."

"You? Do you mean it? Well, come and have some tea first."

It was very early, and there were vacant tables in the alcoves. As he sat opposite her, Orlebar thought what a fraud it was that the things one craved for only came to pass when one had grown resigned to doing without them. How he had besought God for some such chance as this—what a spectacle he had made of himself about her during six unforgettable months! And now he was sipping his tea without emotion, and observing that her clothes compared unfavourably with the other women's in the room! In that moment Orlebar saw the humiliating truth—knew that he had lived his great love down and deceived himself for years. But he didn't want to see—he preferred to deceive himself now. It is often more congenial to be an ass than to acknowledge that you have been one.

"It's a long time since we had tea together, Lucy!"

"Yes," she said.

Digitized by Google

"Well, what have you got to tell me?"

"I think I told you everything in a breath; at least—— What have you been doing all the time?"

"Trying to kill it."

"You're working in London now, eh?"

"Yes, I've chambers in the Temple. Rather swagger compared with the little shanty in the rue Ravignan. How did you come to take up journalism?"

"Someone suggested it—and my twaddle seemed to do. It's pretty sickening."

"What's the idea—it doesn't pay very well, does it?"

"Not on my paper; I get a guinea a week, but —— Oh, why should I bore you with all that?"

"You don't 'bore' me, Lucy."

"Well, I—I prefer to do it. You don't know everything; his people have never forgiven his marriage—they think marriage has handicapped him so badly—and, you may be sure, they blame me more than him; it's always the daughter-in-law's fault! We've only their allowance to live on—it isn't pleasant to be kept by people who resent your existence."

"Poor little woman! No, I didn't know."

"Oh, it's not so bad as all that! Still, I'm glad to be making something, even if it's only a

Digitized by Google

guinea a week. I don't feel so uncomfortable when I meet them, not such a dead weight. We have to go there to dinner on Sundays, and it's rather awful—they tell me what a splendid career he would have had if he hadn't married."

"Damn 'em!" said Orlebar.

"I do—every Sunday afternoon, from the soup to the coffee. Well"—she leant her elbows on the table, and smiled—"have I changed much?"

"No," he said, bravely. "But—but this is brutal hard lines—I didn't dream that you had things like that to put up with! You always seemed so lighthearted in Paris."

"I didn't meet his people in Paris. Besides, things alter in five years; I think— Oh!" she broke off, "it's ridiculous to talk about it to you, I don't know why I'm doing it!"

"Have you anybody else to talk to?"

"No," she admitted, slowly, "that's it. I can't talk to *him* because—well, they're his own people, for one thing; and, besides—well, of course marriage *has* handicapped him, and I suppose he knows it as well as they do."

"Do you mean—? . . . You don't get on now?"

She gave a shrug, and traced lines on the cloth with her spoon. "What do you suppose I mean?"

Digitized by Google

"I am so sorry for you, dear!"

"Oh, I daresay it's my fault. I suppose I don't do all I ought to make up for what I've cost him; it's difficult to do all you ought when —when—" her voice snapped—"when you sometimes wish to God that you hadn't done so much!"

"Perhaps you'd have done better to come to me, after all," said Orlebar, heavily; he couldn't think of anything else to say.

"I tried to be a good woman—I thought you'd forget me; *I* wanted to forget *you*. Why didn't you let me forget you? Why did you send me those flowers every year?"

"Were you vexed with me for sending them?"

"No."

"I'm glad. I sent some to Paris the other day."

"Did you? I wondered if you would; I've been rather impatient for my birthdays. What a confession—a woman impatient for her birthdays! I never meant to see you any more, though; I swore I wouldn't."

"But you wanted to, didn't you?"

Her cup was neglected now; she leant back in the chair, her hands clenched in her lap.

"Didn't you?" he repeated.

Digitized by Google

"Oh, don't!" she said in her throat. "I can't bear it, Phil!"

"What?"

"The life—everything! I'm tired of it all."

"Chuck it!" he muttered; "come away with me to-morrow!"

She didn't speak; she tried to believe that she was struggling. The pause seemed to Orlebar to last a long time while he sat wishing that he hadn't said it. The waitress inquired if they required anything else, and put the check on the table, and took her tip. The place was filling, and a ladies' orchestra began to twang their mandolins.

"Do you want me?" she asked, raising her eyes.

"Do I 'want' you!" What else could he reply?

"Very well, then." She nodded. "I'll go! . . . Let's get out of this—do you mind?—my head aches."

He knew dismally that her consent had come too late, that there would be nothing now to compensate him for the scandal—no months, or weeks, or even minutes of rapture. They got up, and he put the half-crown on the desk, and followed her into the street.

After they had strolled a few yards in silence,

Digitized by Google

he said, as it seemed obligatory, "You've made me very happy."

She answered, "I'll try to." He wished that she had said anything else—it was painful.

"We'd better have a cab. Where shall we go —will you come to the Temple?"

"I think I'd like to go home; you can drive there with me."

"Can you get away in the morning—or shall I put it off?" he asked in the hansom.

"No, I can get away—he won't be back till the evening."

"Back from where?"

"He went down to his people to-day—they're at Brighton now. What time's the train?"

"Ten o'clock—from Charing Cross; I was going by Folkestone and Boulogne. Are you a bad sailor?"

"No, I like it. We'll meet at Charing Cross, then?"

"Yes; in the first-class waiting-room—if you're sure it's not too early for you?"

"It's all right. . . . Is it real, Phil? Half an hour ago we hadn't seen each other; and now—it's to be all our lives! Oh, I hope you'll never be sorry! I wonder?"

"That's unjust."

"Is it?" Her eyes reminded him that he ought

Digitized by Google

to kiss her, and he bent his head. . . . He pitied her acutely as he felt her tears on his face—hated himself for lying to her.

"Cheer up, dearest! Remember how we care for each other," he said.

The effort of affecting joy wore him out as they drove on. Intensely he wished that they had found a quicker cab; he wanted a drink badly, wanted to light a pipe and give way to his gloom. Her hand, which he clasped, seemed to him to grow larger and heavier through the long drive; and when at last they parted at her door, he thanked heaven for the right to heave a sigh, for the freedom to look as moody as he felt.

Five years ago. If it had only happened five—four years ago! The pathos of the situation took him by the throat. What a rotten thing life was! Again his mind reverted to the months when he had been torn with longing for her—the longing just to watch her, to listen to her, no matter what she said. And now he had kissed her for the first time—as a duty. That abandonment of despair had played havoc with him, yet he wished that it had lasted—it would have been worth while, he thought. God! the ecstasy that would have been thrilling in him now if he had suffered like that until this afternoon!

Digitized by Google

At the Club he ordered a "big whisky and a small soda."

"You're off to Rome soon, aren't you?" said a man presently. "You pampered novelists have all the luck!"

"Yes," said Orlebar. The man was the Editor of a daily paper; it occurred to the novelist that he was about to provide the paper with some surprising copy; also, that the editorial greeting would be less informal when they met again.

What a deuce of a lot of talk there would be! the damage it was going to do him socially! Socially? It would injure him financially, too; he recognised it for the first time as he surveyed the room. There was McKinnell, of the *Mayfair*, ragging a waiter because the toast was cold; Orlebar's new novel was to run through the *Mayfair* before it came out in book form. If he knew anything of McKinnell, that highly respectable gentleman would refuse to pollute the pages of his journal with the fiction of a co-respondent. And McKinnell's refusal wouldn't be singular, though he might express it with singular offensiveness. Even among good fellows, it would be, "Sorry, but we daren't run you just now in a paper for household reading—we should get no end of protests. Awful rot, of course, but there it is!" Five hundred pounds gone! Five hun-

Digitized by Google

dred pounds was a large sum; he was no millionaire.

And his books? The sale of his next books would drop in this virtuous country when he had outraged the Eleventh Commandment. If she had been "Lady" somebody the public would have called the case "romantic"—it would have been a big advertisement then—but without the glamour of a title they would only call it "disgraceful." For one reader gained by the scandal, half a dozen would be lost. What a calamity, his turning into Bond Street this afternoon!

And how she had jumped at him, he thought with sudden resentment; she hadn't needed much persuasion! He had been an idiot to exalt her into a heroine at the beginning—since it had been fated that he was to ruin himself, he might at any rate have done it while he was in love with her! And he hadn't even the excuse of youth now; he was making a mess of his life when he was old enough to know better, when he did know better—he was ruining himself against his will! He had another whisky-and-soda, and wondered if there was any chance of his hearing that she had changed her mind. Confound it, she didn't know his address! And anyhow there would be no chance; what was she giving up—a husband who didn't want her. If she had had a child, it

Digitized by Google

would have been a different thing. A pity she hadn't a family! A husband who didn't want her. And he, Philip Orlebar, was going to take her off his hands. Oh, what a mug's game! If he hadn't gone in to have his hat ironed, he wouldn't have met her. And it hadn't really needed ironing either!

He did not remain long in the Club when dinner was over. After all, he had mentioned that his rooms were in the Temple, and the hope that she might try to communicate with him lingered in spite of common-sense. At the gate he looked towards the porter eagerly, but the porter said nothing, and the shock of disappointment told Orlebar how strong the hope had been.

His portmanteaux were half-packed, and he spent the evening straining to catch the sound of the bell. Once it rang, but the visitor was only a bore who had dropped in for a drink and a chat. Orlebar loathed the beaming face as he gave him welcome, and, like the Editor, the bore made envious reference to the morrow's journey; he "wished he were in the author's shoes!" Orlebar was at infinite pains to affect high spirits, for it was undesirable that the man should say afterwards, "I was with him the night before he bolted with her—the poor beggar seemed to have an awful hump." But presently the man said,

Digitized by Google

"You seem a cup low to-night, old chap?" The melancholy stroke of the Temple clock had never sounded so lugubrious as in the hours that followed.

When he woke in the morning, Orlebar remembered that there ought to be a half-bottle of Pommery in the bathroom, and he had it in lieu of tea, with some biscuits. The wine lightened his mood a little; it no longer seemed so hopelessly impossible to conceal his regret; and when he strode into the station, it was with a very fair show of impatience. But his heart leapt as he saw that she wasn't there. He sat down, and glanced alternately at the clock and the doors, praying that she wouldn't come.

She entered just as he was feeling sanguine.

"My darling," he murmured, "here you are!"

"Am I late?"

"I was beginning to be afraid. But there's time enough—I've got the tickets. Where's your luggage?"

"They've taken it through."

"We'd better go, then."

Among the bustle on the platform he could say little more than, "How pale you are!" and "Which are your trunks?" Then they were alone, and the door had been slammed, and the train moved out.

Digitized by Google

"Darling!" he said again. "Well?"

"Well?"

"It seems too good to be true." His tone was lifeless.

"Does it?"

"Doesn't it to you?"

"I think it's true," she said, with a tired smile.

"How pale you are!" he repeated. "Didn't you sleep?"

"Not much. I've been wondering."

"'Wondering'? What?"

"Whether I ought to have said 'no.' What would you have done if I'd said 'no,' Phil? Really?"

"What *can* a man do? I suppose I should have had to put up with it."

She did not reply for a moment. She was gazing straight before her, with a frown.

"Do you think me a bad woman, Phil?"

"I think you're the best woman I've ever known."

"It looks like it, doesn't it?"

"The force of circumstances! If you had met me before you met him——"

"But I didn't. It's pretty mean of me to spoil his life, isn't it?"

"I didn't know that he cared so much about you?"

Digitized by Google

"Oh"—she hesitated—"we've quarrelled, like everybody else, but—but he's very fond of me. Of course, it'll be an awful blow. I can't forget it—I've been thinking of it ever since."

"It just depends . . . the thing you've got to consider is which way you'll be happier yourself. If—I don't know! I suppose there are women who *can't* go wrong and be happy."

"I'm thinking of my duty," she faltered. "You know I love you, don't you? I want you to know it, to keep remembering it all the time. I love you, I love you, I love you! But—" She waited with her heart in her throat.

"But what?" he asked, moodily. "What were you going to say?"

Her eyes closed with pain.

"Eh?" he said.

"There are his people," she stammered; "they'll feel the disgrace so much. I've been considering everything—I—I didn't know what a wrench it would be."

"You'll get over it."

"I'm not sure? Perhaps I shall always—? Do you think I've . . . made a mistake?" Again she waited breathlessly. If he would only seize her in his arms! If he would only cry, "Let them all go to the devil, and remember *me!*"

"If you feel like that," he said feebly, "of

Digitized by Google

course I hardly—I hardly know what I can say to you."

"You can't *think* of anything to say?" she pleaded. "There's nothing—nothing I'm overlooking?"

"There's time; one gets over anything in time," he said, incautiously.

"Oh, my God!" she moaned.

She turned to the window, her face as white as a dead woman's. The terror was confirmed that had stolen on her in the cab, that had haunted her throughout the night—confirmed by his tones, his looks, by every answer he had made to her halting falsehoods; he had learnt to do without her, she had given herself unsought! In the agony of shame that overwhelmed her she could have thrown herself from the compartment; and it was only her love for him that restrained her—she would not reproach him by deed or word; he shouldn't be burdened by the knowledge of what he had made her suffer.

"Well," he said, "it's not too late."

"No," she muttered; "I can't go!"

His pulses jumped; for an instant he couldn't trust his voice.

"You must do as you like, I don't want to take you against your will. . . . If you wish it, you can go back from Folkestone; I suppose—

Digitized by Google

if he's away—there'd be no harm done, would there?"

"You're not angry with me? You won't mind too much?"

"Don't worry about *me*—I want *you* to be happy. To tell you the truth, I think you're right—you are not the woman to kick over the traces, you'd be too cut up about it. Go back and make the best of a bad business—it'll be easier for you to bear than the other, anyhow! We'll see about a train for you as soon as we get in."

At Folkestone Harbour they ascertained that there would be an express to Charing Cross at two o'clock, and he paced the platform with her till it was time to say good-bye. Exhilaration had given him an appetite, but she answered that she wasn't hungry; so, as he had missed his boat, he decided to drive to an hotel on the Leas and have an elaborate luncheon when she had gone. His glances at the playbills on the walls showed him that *San Toy* was at the Pleasure Gardens, and he foresaw himself cheerfully among the audience in the evening. He was feeling on a sudden twenty years younger, and, hard as he strove to acquire a manner of tender gravity, she discerned the improvement in his spirits every time he spoke.

Digitized by Google

Her train arrived in town at a few minutes to four, and she re-entered the lodging-house some hours earlier than her husband. But the fire had gone out, and she had to wait shivering till it was lighted before she could burn the note that she had left on the mantelpiece for him. A little box addressed to her had been delivered during her absence; when the slatternly servant left her alone at last, the woman dared to touch it—and fell to sobbing as if her heart would burst. It contained the violets that Orebar had sent in token of his love.

The box had been redirected from Paris. Owing to the delay, the violets, now that they reached her, were quite dead.

Digitized by Google

THE FAVOURITE PLOT

With Variations

THE financier was cracking walnuts when the curate arrived.

"Hallo, boy!" he said. "Why didn't you come to dinner?"

"How do you do, Uncle Murray? Oh, it was impossible to come in time for dinner. I had a Meeting at six o'clock—and it's a long way from Plaistow to Park Lane. Are you quite well?"

"Pretty fit," said Murray Pybus. "Glad to see you again. I was going to drop you a line; I go to New York next month. Help yourself to port."

"Thank you, I don't drink wine," said Cuthbert, a shade reproachfully.

"I forgot," said Pybus. "Cigar? But you don't smoke either! Well, take an armchair; make yourself comfortable. How's Plaistow?"

The curate cleared his throat. "I was anxious to have a talk with you, Uncle Murray, on a very important subject."

"So you wrote me. Well, I know your important subjects; you needn't go into details; of

Digitized by Google

course it's a bona fide case. How much do you want?"

"Frankly, I am nervous," faltered his nephew.

"Better try the port," counselled Pybus. "No? All right; stick to your colours, even if they're a blue ribbon."

"You have always been so generous—more than generous. Your subscriptions, and—and your proposals as regards myself, though I couldn't accept them, were——"

"Natural enough! You'll have to have the lot one day—I've nobody else to leave it to, and I'm not the man to marry again." He laughed. "It'll be a funny position, eh—an East End curate blooming into a millionaire? You're a queer fish, Cuthbert! I don't say any more about your not coming into the City—you weren't cut out for it—but what do you want to starve in the slums for? If the Church was the only thing to suit you, you might as well have had a snug berth in it."

"I thought—at least I hoped—" said Cuthbert stiffly, "that I had made my principles clear to you long ago. I have no desire for a 'snug berth'; I told you so when the Call came to me. My object in taking Orders was never to attain material comforts; if I had sought worldly advantages, I should have embraced a commercial

Digitized by Google

career instead. I choose to labour among those who need my poor help the most; and I choose to be in truth their brother—not to hold myself aloof from them, a preceptor in a pleasance."

"Oh, very proper, very high-minded," said the financier hurriedly; "a reputation for conscientiousness, of course, is a valuable asset. Have it your own way, my lad. If I'm not to do anything for you in my lifetime, we'll say no more about it."

The curate flushed.

"As a matter of fact," he stammered, "my reason for wishing to see you was to beg you to do something for me. My principles are quite unchanged; I still mean to work among the poor, I'm still resolved to abstain from living among them luxuriously, but—well, circumstances have arisen which—er— Perhaps I had better tell you everything, as it happened."

"Best way," said Pybus, repressing a groan.

"I was rather seriously unwell some weeks ago, and my Vicar induced me to take a brief holiday. He is always most considerate."

"Any family at the vicarage?"

"Family? There are his three daughters."

"Ah," murmured the millionaire. "Yes, he would consider you attentively. Go on."

"Some pleasant seaside place was desirable.

Digitized by Google

and I went to Hastings. The Castle is most fascinating."

"Well?"

"Well, my lodgings were not cheerful, and the weather was unpropitious, so altogether——"

"You got the hump?"

"I was—er—rather—yes. One evening, as it was too wet to take a walk, I attended a performance of *A Crown of Thorns*. Of course, I had heard about it—I knew that it had been approved by organs of the Press that don't mention such things as a rule—but I confess that it amazed me. I found its religious teaching quite as admirable as the historical instruction it afforded—the insight into the life of ancient Rome. It was practically my first visit to a theatre, and a most memorable experience. Perhaps you know the play?"

"Girl holds up a cross in the limelight and the lions are afraid to eat her?"

"No, sir, there are no lions. There are lions in the pictorial advertisements of the play, but they are not actually visible on the stage. It isn't too much to say that I was 'overwhelmed.' I was ashamed of the unreasoning prejudice I had always entertained against theatrical performances."

Digitized by Google

"You haven't come to ask me to endow a theatre, I hope?" put in the millionaire genially.

"Oh, indeed, not at all, sir—the idea had not presented itself to me. Hear me out! The part of the heroine was taken by a lady who possessed such spiritual fervour that, at first, I regretted her choice of a career. How true it is that prejudice dies hard! I grieved—it was narrow of me! —that she was not devoting herself to the propagation of faith among the heathen of our own time, instead of to the mimic—er—I mean that it seemed to me she was wasting her precious gifts, that she ought to have been a missionary."

"I quite follow you," said Pybus drily.

"I did not recognize the truth at once; but then it came to me—I understood! As I looked round at the eyes wet with tears, I saw that the stage may make for good as powerfully as the pulpit; I saw that this beautiful girl, uttering the grace that was in her to hundreds nightly—I don't know if I mentioned that she has been favoured with remarkable beauty—was stirring the minds of mere pleasure-seekers to the contemplation of higher things; I saw that she was working in the same Cause as myself."

"Great Scott, boy, you've fallen in love with an actress!" exclaimed Pybus. "So that's it?"

"Later, I certainly learnt to love her," replied

Digitized by Google

the curate with dignity, "though I don't perceive by what process you have arrived at the fact. I had the happiness to meet her the next afternoon —in the waiting-room at a dentist's—and the passing of a magazine led to conversation."

"Did you tell her that you thought she ought to have been a missionary?"

"I believe I did say something of my earlier regret; and she agreed with me that she was doing equally exalted work on the stage. Perhaps my enlightenment may be partly due to that conversation; her thoughts on the subject were very beautiful. One answer that she made impressed me deeply: 'Religion and Art,' she said, 'are in reality the same thing.' . . . Without the context it is not so forcible, but when she said it, it was a perfect expression of what we meant, it was most illuminative!"

"How much have you been muddling yourself up with this girl?" asked the financier curtly.

"Sir?"

"I say, how far has it gone? What happened after she illuminated the dentist's?"

"We met often after the dentist's—on the Parade. We used to listen to the town crier together; she found a town crier so quaint; anything that savours of a bygone age appeals to her strongly. Fortunately, too, the company

Digitized by Google

was going to London—to various theatres in the suburbs—so I was able to see her when I returned; and—and she has consented to be my wife."

"You told her you were my nephew, eh—my heir?"

"I saw no reason for reticence. I trust you have not formed a poor opinion of a lady whom you have never seen?"

"Not at all; I should have a poor opinion of her if she'd refused you under the circumstances. But you're making yourself ridiculous. You've lost your head over an actress; you've taken a queer, clerical way about it, but you've lost your head over an actress. It won't do, Cuthbert, the thing's absurd."

Cuthbert had turned very pale.

"I'm sorry to find you so unjust," he groaned. "I had hoped, in view of the many offers you have so kindly made me, that you'd be willing to —to further my happiness. Marriage upon my stipend is impossible, as you know. I trusted to your affection to—to— Why, you've pressed me to take an allowance over and over again!"

"Look here, boy," exclaimed Pybus, "I'm going to talk straight to you! You're the nearest relative I've got, and though you were never the sort I was keen on leaving a million to, I knew

Digitized by Google

you'd waste it in a creditable and conscientious kind of way. Also I'm only fifty, and I hoped you'd have got more sense by the time I died. But this alters matters. I shouldn't leave my money to you if you made a ridiculous marriage, and I don't part with a quid to help you to do it. That's plain English. You can tell her what I've said when you keep the appointment at the stage-door to-night! She can marry you if she likes, but she'll live in Plaistow on what you've got now—there'll be nothing from me."

"And you," observed Cuthbert bitterly, "are called 'a man of the world'! Why, sir, you are displaying all the narrowness of the least sophisticated. She is an actress—and so to wed her must be misfortune! She is an actress——"

"And you're a fool," said Pybus. "But I don't want to quarrel with you—I've been there myself—thirty years ago—we've all been there some time. You go to a theatre, you see a pretty woman, and you think you're in love. You're a curate, so your symptoms are a bit complicated, but the complaint's very usual, Cuthbert, believe me—it won't be fatal."

"Will you allow me to introduce her to you?" pleaded Cuthbert. "Will you give me a chance to overcome your prejudices?"

"No, I won't; I haven't any prejudices. I

Digitized by Google

daresay the girl's right enough—for the right man; but she's a long way from right for you. You don't really suppose she can care about you. You're a good lad, but the last fellow in the world to please an actress. If you hadn't told her you were my nephew, she'd have laughed in your face when you proposed to her."

"I am prepared," said the curate resignedly, "to suffer humiliation if need be."

"Oh, well, I don't want to hurt your feelings. But—er—well, she *would! I* know what actresses are like."

"But you don't know *her*. If you would talk to her once, she would convert you; you would own you were wrong. My life's happiness is at stake. Before you decide, let me bring her to see you. Surely it is no more than fair?"

Pybus picked up the evening papers. "It's no good going on with it; that's all I've got to say."

He opened the *Pall Mall*.

"Good-night, sir," quavered the curate, extending a hopeless hand.

"Good-night, boy," said the financier cordially. "Whenever you want anything in reason let me know."

Cuthbert took a bus to Victoria, and arrived at the Shakespeare, Clapham, in ample time. It was still embarrassing to him to loiter at a stage-

Digitized by Google

door; but a man is justified in meeting his fiancée anywhere. He endeavoured to assert this by his bearing when loafers stared at him. Nobody was ever quite so high-minded as Cuthbert tried to look when he waited at stage-doors.

"My own, I have failed," he told her, as they walked to Clapham Junction.

The hand on his arm trembled. "What did he say?"

"He was obdurate; he refused point blank. Why should I pain you by repeating the insults I had to bear?"

"Just because I am an actress!" exclaimed the girl pathetically. "Oh, what we have to put up with, we artists; how uncharitable they are to us! . . . Then it's all over between you and I?"

He winced. But tears were swimming in her lovely eyes; it would have been heartless to mention grammar.

"I cannot lose you," he cried, "I cannot! We might—no, it's out of the question. What's to be done? Angela, I almost lose faith!"

"Hush," she murmured, looking upward; "it may be all for the best, dear—it must be—though it is hard for us to understand it. . . . Do you think he would relent when we were married?"

"I fear not—he would never know you. If he'd let me take you to him, we should succeed,

Digitized by Google

I'm sure—your intelligence and beauty would win him over, though he wouldn't appreciate your soul; but he declined to see you."

"It's a pity I can't be introduced to him as somebody else—go there as a hospital nurse or something. Then when I'd got round him, and he was very grateful to me, I could say, 'my name is Angela Noble—I love your nephew!' "

"It is a sweet idea. But his health is robust, and, besides, he goes abroad very soon."

"That's what *I* shall have to do," she said moodily.

"You?"

"If we don't marry, I must take the engagement for New York; you know I have the offer open—I shall have to go."

"New York?" cried Cuthbert. "I hoped you had dismissed the notion." He was meditative. "Angela, I have a daring thought! I will *not* fail."

Pybus was considerably surprised a day or two later at receiving a pleasant letter from the young man wishing him an agreeable voyage and inquiring by what boat he was to cross; he was considerably irritated at receiving a second letter reminding him of his permission to ask reasonable favours. A lady of the curate's acquaintance was "departing for America, unprotected, by

Digitized by Google

that very vessel." An act of courtesy that Mr. Pybus would kindly show to the friendless lady, his affectionate nephew would much appreciate. It was added tactfully that, her means precluding speculation, no fear need be entertained of her angling for tips.

Pybus swore, and dictated a gracious note.

And the boat sailed.

Miss Noble unpacked her cabin trunk with the painful consciousness that steamers travelled fast. When she had made the chance remark that inspired her lover, she had been thinking vaguely of a sick-room and plenty of time for womanly gentleness to be admired. "Between Acts II. and III. a month elapses." An Atlantic racer was alarmingly different.

And the uncle was more discouraging still. Every uncle that she had ever known refusing his consent had a white moustache and side whiskers, and was slightly bowed with age and cynicism. Here was a hale and hearty uncle, carelessly good-humoured. Such a person seemed less likely to break up into slushy sentiment than the iciest cynic that ever sneered. The report that reached Plaistow from Queenstown was not a sanguine one. "There's just this in our favour," she had scribbled: "he has no suspicion who I am, and he can't escape me without

Digitized by Google

jumping overboard. You may bet"—"bet" had been imperfectly erased—"feel sure I shall do as much in the time as I can. Dear one——" Cuthbert kissed the ship's stationery with enthusiasm.

She was a bright girl—she hasn't been seen to advantage with the curate—and she was working for by far the most profitable engagement of her career; before the first sweepstake on the run she began to play her part in quite another manner than the one she had mentally rehearsed. The spiritual note that Cuthbert had expected of her —to go on being the heroine of *A Crown of Thorns* after the curtain was down—wouldn't catch on here at all, she decided; there was no hit to be made on those lines. Admiration, a wide-eyed homage of the financier's cleverness? Probably all the women he met looked at him like that—it had been played out long ago. The smartest thing would be to treat the middle-aged magnate as if he were an amusing young man!

She did it. It was much easier than being soulful, much less fatiguing. She laughed, she chaffed, she even flirted with him a little. Pybus, who had been prepared to find her a consummate nuisance, hadn't been on such good terms with himself for years.

The day before they sighted Sandy Hook he said, "I hope I shall see something of you after

Digitized by Google

we land? Are you staying in New York long?"

"I—I hardly know," she answered. "It depends." It depended on the way he took it when she sprung the truth on him directly; she felt less self-possessed than usual.

"Anyhow, there's my address. If there's anything I can do I shall be glad."

"That's very kind of you. I wonder how much you mean it?" She flashed a glance. "I might ask for something big."

"Ah, I didn't pledge myself to do anything you asked; I said I'd be glad to do anything I could."

"Cautious person!" They were pacing the deck, and they walked in silence for a minute. She was wondering if it would be discreet to delay her confession till they had arrived.

"You're nervy to-day," said Pybus. "You look as if you were going to say you had a headache. It's just the moment for a glass of champagne and a cracker. Let's go below and get them."

"I don't think I care about it, thanks; but you're quite right—I'm nervy. I want to tell you something. Shall we sit down?"

They sat down, and again there was silence.

"Well?" he questioned.

"I don't know how to begin."

Digitized by Google

"Let me help you," suggested Pybus. "Pull me up if I'm wrong. You are an actress; my nephew Cuthbert thinks he is in love with you; and you came aboard in the hope of persuading me to agree to your marriage. Whether you were going to New York, anyhow, I don't know; I trust you were, for I should be sorry to have put you to so much inconvenience. Now the beginning is over—proceed!"

Miss Noble had uttered a faint exclamation of astonishment; she stared blankly at the sea.

"You seem surprised," he said. "That isn't flattering to my intelligence. Cuthbert's circle of pretty women is strictly limited, I take it—any doubt that I had of your identity when I got his letter was removed the moment I saw you."

"Oh, then you do think I'm pretty?" faltered Miss Noble.

"You are not a beauty, but your face is pleasing. I say you threw yourself in my way with the intention of convincing me that you were a much nicer girl than I supposed you to be. Am I correct?"

"Quite correct," said Miss Noble in a low voice. "It was an innocent plot."

"It is the favourite one—it has been in the English magazines every month since I was a child. Well, I am convinced. Don't misunder-

Digitized by Google

stand me. I find you brainier, wittier, and nicer in every respect; in fact, you are even more calculated than I assumed to spoil his life."

"Mr. Pybus!"

"Keep your temper—it's a reflection on him, not on you. I'll explain. Cuthbert is my heir *faute de mieux*—which may be translated as 'Because I haven't a son, much as I should like one'—and though I've never pretended he was the apple of my eye, I should regret to see him come to grief. If you were the flabby, phonographic sort of young woman to echo his sentiments and make him happy, I'd say, 'Take him with my sympathy—he's yours!' You're a hundred per cent. too charming for the marriage to be a success. You have come down to his standard very effectually so far, I admit—it must have given you a lot of trouble—but you couldn't hope to impose on him always; before he had discovered half your attractions they'd break his heart."

"I—I don't know what to say to you. Then—then you refuse?"

"It's a novelty to see you at a loss. Yes, I refuse unhesitatingly. Among the few certainties of life we may count the fact that you'll never marry Cuthbert with any help from me."

"For the reason that you've given me?"

"Among others. If I may say so, for the fur-

Digitized by Google

ther reason that I don't wish *you* to be unhappy, either. You find him a pill, naturally, and you'd have been bored to death."

"You are despising me," she exclaimed; "you think I'm a mercenary creature without a heart, who——"

"Don't talk to me as if I were Cuthbert. I don't despise you in the least. You are in a very precarious and overcrowded calling, and you'd have married him for position—as hundreds and thousands of fashionable and wealthy girls would be willing to marry him, if I smiled approval—but I know you'd have found him dear at the price. And I have a third reason, though I can assert quite truthfully that the first alone would prevent my consenting. I'd like to marry you myself."

"You?" she gasped.

"Why not? Of course you're not in love with me, but you like me much better than you like him, you can't dispute it. Professionally you are nineteen, I suppose; that's to say you are really about twenty-eight; so I'm two-and-twenty years older than you are. It's a lump, but I'm lively for my age and if you go on flirting with me you'll make me feel considerably younger. It'll be rough on Cuthbert I own—my marrying you will cost him about a million. Still, he won't have

Digitized by Google

you in any case; and a hundred and fifty a year would be a great deal more appropriate. Besides, it's entirely his own fault; he should have taken 'no' for an answer when he came to see me, and then I should never have met you. Think it over. If you regard me as a fairly young man, you needn't hesitate; and if you don't, remember that there's no fool like an old one—that you'll have a very good time."

"You couldn't respect me?" murmured Miss Noble. "You'd feel that I was only marrying the money—that the man didn't matter?"

"I am not without some natural vanity, I assure you. Come, which do you feel more at home with, him or me?"

"You," admitted Miss Noble softly.

"That settles it!" said Pybus. "We'll get Tiffany's to send round some engagement rings in the morning."

Digitized by Google

TIME, THE HUMORIST

HERBERT HARDING was one of the most distinguished dramatic critics in London, one of the most scholarly and acute. Yet no man is a prophet to his family, and at home "H.H." was considered to be "wasting his life at the game."

Of course, the old people took the paper in which his first-night notices appeared, and they wrestled with his essays in volume form—essays, by the way, which will always be ranked among the most valuable contributions to the psychology of the theatre; but the references to Diderot, and Stendhal, and other persons of whom they had never heard before baffled them mightily, and if the book had been written by anybody but Herbert, they would never have read a dozen pages of it. As Harding senior, a sensible and hearty Englishman, used to say to his wife, "Thank God, he wasn't literary himself, and to discuss whether the heroine of a play would have behaved like this, or have behaved like that, when one knew that she wasn't a real woman at all, seemed to him the sort of tomfoolishness for young girls in a drawing-room, and not the kind

Digitized by Google

of thing he would have expected a son of his to do for a living, damn it!"

There were persons who professed to see in the fact that Harding had always been unappreciated by his relatives, the explanation of his marriage. But there were many cultured women who admired him; Gertrude Millington's homage was not singular. She was, certainly, amiable, and she "wrote"; yet when one remembers the triviality of her stories, one would have supposed her authorship would deter, rather than attract, a man like Harding. Besides, he had privately resented the necessity for making her acquaintance.

She was a friend of one of his sisters—he had met her when he went down to his people for a fortnight in the autumn; and his mother had said:

"Oh, my son Herbert—Miss Millington. You have often heard us talk of Miss Millington, Herbert? You two should find lots to say to each other, both being writers."

Harding, who had never heard Miss Millington's name till then, there or anywhere else, thought that his mother ought to have known better.

Perhaps the girl thought so, too, for her smile was embarrassed.

Digitized by Google

"I never expected to get the chance to meet Mr. Harding," she said reverentially.

Harding thawed. Since she recognised him as a master, he was prepared to tolerate her. In five minutes he had gathered that to be talking to him was one of the events of her life.

Naturally they talked of the theatre, and though her attitude towards the drama was untrained, Harding perceived an eagerness to be enlightened, a quickness of intelligence that saved him from being bored. That, at any rate, was how he put it to himself, though whether her eagerness and intelligence would have interested him if she had not been passably good-looking is a doubtful point.

The fortnight proved uncommonly pleasant to him, and as he did not have an opportunity for looking at any of her work until they were back in town and he was well in love with her, the crudity of her fiction did not infuriate him so violently as it would have done otherwise. On the contrary, he persuaded himself that, underlying the immaturities of style and characterisation, there was the glint of genuine talent.

His income, derived solely from his pen, was slender; but everything is relative, and Miss Millington lived in a boarding-house at West Kensington. Compared with her own, his means

Digitized by Google

were substantial. To cut the courtship short, he married her. Miss Millington, the unknown, became the wife of Harding, the august. Women who had made a reputation called on them, and "wondered what he could have seen in her, they were sure!" His best friends confessed themselves "a bit surprised at his choice"; and Harding, with all the ardour of his intellect and his affection, proceeded to cultivate his wife's mind.

Never was a disciple more devoted. She put her story-writing aside—he had advised her to do that until she was more widely read—and plodded conscientiously through the list of classics that he drew up for her improvement. As often as he obtained two seats, she went to the theatre with him, and listened absorbed to his catalogue of the play's defects. Because she loved him dearly and panted to please, she never failed to assure him that she understood, and thoroughly agreed with everything he said—though this was a flagrant lie—and Harding promoted her to Ibsen, and expounded his qualities to her for hours on end.

She grew to miss her scribbling by degrees. By degrees she grew to sicken at the intellectual stuffing. Before long, her delight at going to a theatre was marred by her dread of the critic's edifying monologue when they returned. But she never yawned, she never faltered—she endured

Digitized by Google

the deadly dulness of her education without a murmur.

Her confinement was a holiday. Harding, however, was far too fond of his wife to neglect her because he had a son, and after she was up again, he devoted as much earnest attention to her as before. By this time she could give forth dozens of his opinions with all the fidelity of a phonograph, and he contemplated her progress with the tenderest pride.

The baby, and a nurse, and the necessary change in the domestic arrangements meant increased expenses, and now she sometimes reflected that the modest cheques obtainable by her pen would be an aid.

Once she said to him:

"Herbert, when do you think I might go back to my work? Don't you think I might write something again now?"

"What do you want to write?" he asked, with an indulgent smile.

"I suppose what I ought to do is another book; I should like to write a play, though."

"A play?" He stared. "My child, you aren't a dramatist."

"Well, I never *shall* be one if I don't make a beginning. I should think I ought to be able to manage a piece, after all I've read."

Digitized by Google

Harding smiled again, wryly. The temerity of the novice was a wonderful thing.

"You know more than you did, but dramatic construction isn't to be mastered in a year and a half, goose, even by the born playwright."

"It's never to be mastered at all without trying, is it?"

There was a touch of obstinacy in her tone, and he was greatly disappointed. Since she could speak in so light a fashion of accomplishing a play, it seemed that she had learnt nothing after all. The magnitude of the undertaking did not impress her in the least—she talked like the proverbial amateur.

"Doesn't it occur to you," he said patiently, "that, although I know considerably more about it than you do, *I* don't write plays? I recognise what I lack. And I recognise what *you* lack. I'm not trying to make a dramatist of you, my child—I simply want you to have an acquaintance with what is best in dramatic literature; I want you to be able to discriminate. As to your writing again, perhaps you will. But not yet. Not yet, by any means! And when you do, of course it should be a story. Really whether you write, or whether you don't, is of no importance —why aspire to authorship?"

Before they married she had counted herself

Digitized by Google

an author already. She winced. But his remonstrance, affectionate as it was, took the pluck out of her. She let the subject down, and put her aspirations on the shelf. She divided her time between the baby and the books henceforth, though the baby came gradually to receive the larger share.

They had three children, and an odious little house in Balham when she did pencil "Act I.—A Drawing-Room" at last. She did not mean to let Harding guess her project till the comedy was finished; she knew that he would have discouraged her, that he would have repeated that she had no qualifications for dramatic work, or, at best, that it was years too soon for her to attempt it. But she told herself that when the piece was done, when she read it to him, and saw his pleasure, that would make amends for everything. She pictured his surprise as she said carelessly, "Oh, by the way, if you can spare an hour this evening, there's something I want you to hear!" The anxiety of his gaze as she produced the manuscript and announced "A Comedy in Three Acts," she could imagine that too! He would sit down nervously, twisting his moustache, and, of course, her voice would wobble frightfully. Then presently his face would change—she foresaw his smile, the sudden lift of his head at a good line,

Digitized by Google

the growing wonder of his expression. In her hopes she heard him exclaim that her work had wit, brilliance, and, above all, reality—that she had amazed and made him proud of her. It was a young and rather foolish woman's dream, but it sprang from her love for him quite as much as from her personal ambitions.

And she wrote. She drove her pen in secret for months; she was not a slow writer—far from it—but there were few occasions on which she could feel confident of being undisturbed. Her best hours were when there was a "first night" somewhere, for then there was no danger of Harding popping into the room before she could thrust the manuscript out of sight. While the critic sat in judgment at the theatre, his wife sat in Balham scribbling dialogue with a rapidity that would have horrified him. Indeed, it made her distrust herself in moments; she questioned if it was possible for first-rate work to be produced so quickly. Yet when she read the scene, it sounded capital. She came to the conclusion that her swiftness proved her to be even more accomplished as a dramatist than she had supposed. Harding generally found her in high good-humour when he returned. And though it was very late, for now his notices had to be delivered before he went home, he used to tell her the plot

Digitized by Google

of the play that he had been to see, and she would agree sapiently with all his observations.

The disciple had, in fact, become a companion by now, and, despite the state of the exchequer, Harding knew no regret for having married her. When he recalled the uncultured girl of the honeymoon, and constrasted her with the woman who understood most of his English references and quotations, he was delighted with the success he had effected. It was with a shock, a shudder, one day, that he picked off the mantelpiece a bill for typewriting *"The Audacity of Dinah,* in three acts." Forebodings hinted that his success wasn't quite so triumphant as he had thought.

"What's this?"

"Oh!" How stupid she had been to leave it there! Now she had to tell him the great news differently from the way she had planned. "It's mine."

"I see it is," said Harding. " 'The Audacity of Dinah'?"

Her nod was embarrassed. "Yes."

"I didn't know you were writing."

"No, I didn't want you to know till I could read it to you; I meant to tell you after dinner. I—I'm very anxious to hear if you think it will do." She flushed, and smiled shyly. "I'm rather pleased with it; I've been at it a long time; I

Digitized by Google

think—I think I've done something you'll find a good word for."

"Baby!" said Harding, pinching her cheek; "I've no doubt I shall find a good word for it, but I'm afraid I shall have to say things you won't like, too. I shall be quite candid with you, I warn you."

"Oh, that's just what I want," she declared, laughing happily; "I want you to forget who I am altogether—you must be just Herbert Harding listening to a new author. No compliments, no—what's the word?—euphemisms. It's to be real criticism, please."

"All right," he said. "Well, when am I to hear it—at once?"

"I think after dinner will be best—I've always pictured you listening to it after dinner. And there'll be nothing to interrupt us when the last post has been. Mind, I shall be awfully frightened; you must make allowances for that."

Something in her hearing, in her voice—more still, perhaps, something in the fact that she was dear to him—raised his hopes. His suspense was nearly as keen as her own while they dined. And when the servant had shut the door, and Gertrude commanded him to "sit down in that chair," and to refrain from looking at her for the

Digitized by Google

first few minutes, his hands were not quite steady as he filled his pipe.

She drew her own chair to the table, and after an instant's hesitation, began to read.

Harding listened intently, his gaze fixed on the fire. And before she had read for half an hour astonishment laid hold of him. Awhile ago, catching something of her excitement, he had fancied that the play might reveal a talent that he had underrated, a promise of good things to come; originally, he had fancied that it would repel him; but at no time had he fancied that it would be quite so dejecting as it was. He was astounded that any woman who had studied so much good work could be capable of writing so badly. The man suffered—silently and acutely suffered—as, gaining courage, she declaimed her travesty of human nature with gusto. He pitied her, he could have wept for her, he would rather have been compelled to sit out a pantomime every night for a year than to tell her the truth.

But she closed the covers of Act I., and said, with her soul in her eyes, "Well?"

He shifted the pipe between his teeth, and stifled a groan. "Let me hear it right through," he answered, postponing the evil moment.

"Act II.," she continued in a clear voice.

It was eleven o'clock when the ordeal ended.

Digitized by Google

His wife leant back in her seat, her hands clasped in her lap, and waited.

Despairingly he sought for some particle of honest praise.

"The theme isn't bad," he said.

"Ah!"

"But it isn't worked out properly."

"Oh!"

He hastened to add, "There are lots of very pretty lines."

"That's nice!" She beamed.

"You put them in the wrong people's mouths, though. In the last act, you make your misanthrope talk like the Cheeryble Brothers."

"Kindness has changed his nature then. Don't you like the girl?"

"She's not consistent," he complained; "she's seventeen one minute, and thirty-five the next. She has had 'no social experience,' yet she scores off the woman of the world in every answer. That's the fault all through—if you see a chance for something smart, you can't resist it, whether it's appropriate to the character or not. The mother makes an epigram in the situation where she thinks her son has been killed—she'd be inarticulate, she wouldn't fire off epigrams."

There was a long pause. At last she said, stonily:

Digitized by Google

"In other words, you don't think anything of it?"

He shifted the pipe again. "Well——"

"Oh, be frank, Herbert!" she cried. She was very white. "There musn't be any humbug between you and me!"

"It's no good, Gertie," he confessed wretchedly.

She gathered it up, and put it in a drawer, and shut the drawer very quietly. Her mouth had hardened. He was a distinguished critic, and her husband; but she was an author, and her pride was in arms. For the first time she doubted his wisdom. For the first time she opposed her will to his. It was "no good," he had said—she could not accept the pronouncement, she would prove to him that he was wrong!

"We won't talk any more about it," she said presently, when he offered some feeble comfort. "I've made a mistake, that's all." But she meant that her mistake was having invited his opinion, not having written the comedy.

She determined to submit it to the Piccadilly Theatre without delay. Of course, she would not put her own name to it now—as he thought it so worthless he would probably object to its being known as his wife's even if it were produced. She would choose a pseudonym. And if her work

Digitized by Google

were taken, if it made a success, she would mention to him, very gently, but firmly, that he was too ready to find fault, that his prejudices warped his judgment—in fact, that he wasn't quite so excellent a critic as he believed himself to be.

At this point it may be stated that his criticism of *The Audacity of Dinah* was absolutely sound. The piece was every bit as bad as he thought it.

She posted the manuscript the following afternoon, and many weeks later it was returned to her with "regret." The Piccadilly, she said doggedly, was not the only theatre in London—she made up the parcel once more and sent it to the Diadem. The Diadem also "regretted," and took longer to communicate the fact. To several West End theatres the comedy was offered unavailingly; and then—she re-read the brief note with rapture several times—a manager wrote asking her to call.

Not before the contract was signed and stamped did she announce her news to Harding. It was a great moment for her. Nearly eighteen months had passed since the day of the reading, but she had not forgotten the humiliation that he had inflicted. He realised that suddenly, discomfitingly, by the inflexions of her voice, by the look in her eyes, by her new air of self-esteem.

"I'm very glad for you," he faltered. And she

Digitized by Google

replied, "I'm sure you are, dear," with a touch of patronage.

He did not attend the production himself; as he explained to her, he would have been bound to express his convictions sincerely. The Editor put on another man to "do" *The Audacity of Dinah,* and, on the whole, the other man's notice was favourable. With a few exceptions, all the Press was tolerant. Better still, the piece captured the Public. The booking next day was brisk, and increased steadily through the week. On the second Saturday night they played to "the capacity of the house." The comedy came to be known as one of the few genuine successes of the year, and of course it had leaked out that the author was Mrs. Herbert Harding. The illustrated journals devoted a page to her photograph, favouring their readers with details of her "literary methods," and with her views on the world in general. A manufacturer's advertisements informed the kingdom that *The Audacity of Dinah* had been written with a "Dashaway Fountain Pen (price 10s. 6d., of all stationers)." She lectured to the Front Row Club on "How to Write a Play." Posters proclaimed the "300th Performance." And various theatrical managers expressed a deferential hope that they, too, might

Digitized by Google

be privileged to produce some of her brilliant work.

They were. She has never written anything so popular since, but she has reeled out several successful plays, of similar quality. The Hardings have removed from Balham, and live in a high-sounding Terrace at a fashionable Gate, and the children often caution Herbert "not to make a noise on the stairs, because mamma is busy." Gertrude is a personage who speaks with quiet authority in the home to-day, and drives to rehearsal in a thousand-guinea motor-car. When he goes alone, the critic takes an omnibus, and feels more cheerful. In spite of the luxurious ménage that she provides, he wishes frequently that he were alone for good.

Digitized by Google

THE BACK OF BOHEMIA

I

As two ladies came out of the florist's in the rue Royale and moved towards their carriage, the younger of the pair gave a start of surprise, and exclaimed, "Ernest!"

"Who?" said Lady Liddington, vaguely.

Her niece was already shaking hands with him —a young man with a voluminous necktie and a soft felt hat, who looked poor and clever and bohemian.

"Ernest," she cried, "how glad I am to see you!"

"Kate! Who'd have thought of meeting you here!" He gazed at her with astonishment and admiration. "I should hardly have recognised you."

"I've grown up. Let me . . . my aunt, Lady Liddington. You've often heard of Ernest, Aunt Madge. I was his first critic. And your mother and father?"

"Quite well, thanks."

"They're with you?"

Digitized by Google

"No, oh, no! they're still in Coblenz. The governor grumbles to me regularly once a month; the mater bears it better. Poor old governor! he was meant to lounge through life with a rose-bud in his buttonhole, wasn't he? I've been living in Paris nearly five years now."

"And working?"

"And working. I'm a painter, of sorts, at last."

"I can see you're a painter," laughed the girl. "Why 'of sorts'?"

"Art is a very arduous profession, I believe?" murmured Lady Liddington, politely. Mentally she was praying that no one who knew her would happen to pass. Really the young man was a "sight"! "Do you exhibit?"

"Not yet. I only sell."

"Oh? I always understood——"

"I'm at the lowest of the practical stages, Lady Liddington. At present I sell—somehow! Later on I shall manage to exhibit, and be unable to sell. Finally I hope to exhibit and sell, too. But the way is long."

"I see," she replied, profoundly uninterested.

"A real live artist!" said Miss Ormerod, gaily. "How proud you must be! It seems only the other day that you were a boy at home, dreaming dreams."

Digitized by Google

"Yes, I was good at dreams; dreams don't need anatomy. How well I remember it all!"

"You must come and see us," she said, "and soon! I've a hundred questions to ask you. What are we doing to-morrow, Aunt Madge?"

"Er—to-morrow? There's the Elysée in the evening, you know; and the next night, I'm afraid— But if to-morrow afternoon——"

"I shall be delighted," he said.

The victoria drove away; and the two occupants mused for a moment.

The elder was the first to speak.

"Your introduction was delicious. Who *is* the gentleman?"

"You don't mean to say you don't know him? —Ernest!"

"Yes, I heard you call him 'Ernest.' I shouldn't do it again if I were you. Hasn't he a surname by any chance?"

"Not call him—? Oh, how absurd! He's Ernest Mallock. Why, we were almost like brother and sister till his people had to leave Moyamehane and go abroad. My mother must have spoken of them to you a thousand times."

"Oh," said Lady Liddington, "he's Cyril Mallock, is he? But you're not in the wilds of County Roscommon now, remember! You've grown up, and——"

Digitized by Google

"And the Mallocks have lost all their money!" concluded Miss Ormerod, with warmth. "Don't leave that out, because it's really what you want to say. Yes, they're ruined—and what of it? If you think it's any reason why I should cut a boy in the streets who——"

"My dear," said the other, plaintively, "I did not suggest that you should cut *anybody* in the streets. I only hinted— It's very unkind of you to talk like that."

The girl turned apologetically.

"Poor Aunt Madge! Yes, I was bolting, wasn't I? I'm sorry. But if you knew how happy it made me to see him—it was like a bit of my childhood crossing the road. It was Ernest who taught me to sit a horse, and how to throw a fly. It was Ernest who taught me *not* to paint. He used to kiss me up to the time I was fifteen."

"My dear!" She looked apprehensively at the coachman's back. "Don't! . . . So he is Lord Fernahoe's nephew, that young man in the distressing costume? Of course he has no chance of the succession, not the slightest. Fernahoe has a son, and I've met him. He's twenty years of age and quite offensively robust. Wins cups and things, and takes absurd dumb-bells in his portmanteau when he stays anywhere. Your friend can go on dressing like a disreputable glazier

Digitized by Google

for ever, if that's the only prospect he can boast."

"I don't suppose he even thinks of it. His clothes seem to jar you like an Anarchist banner. He used to be rather a dandy, I can tell you, till the crash came. And Lord Fernahoe might have paid off the mortgage without feeling it—hateful man! But he quarrelled with the Mallocks years ago."

"Very strange, isn't it? Perhaps his brother did something disgraceful."

"Why on earth should it be Mr. Mallock's fault?"

"Well, I'm sure I don't know, my dear. Only one of them must have been to blame, it's very certain; and it's always pleasanter to blame the people you don't meet; don't you think so? How sweet those roses smell, but what a price! I'm sorry we bought them."

Men said of Madge Liddington that she was "a good sort." Her worldliness was not disagreeable, not too real. She herself said that she knew what she ought to do, but somehow never did it. Her theories were more cynical than her heart. And on the morrow, when Mallock came, she was gracious, and even cordial.

He had made some concessions to the fashionable address. His clothes, if shabby, were less unconventional to-day; and obviously he had no

Digitized by Google

idea of falling in love with Kate. There was too little formality between them for a chaperon to be wholly pleased, but, at the same time, there was nothing on either side to suggest the existence of sentiment.

"Tell me all," said Miss Ormerod, "tell me frankly! Does it come up to your expectations? You're a painter, you're in Paris, you're in bohemia; is it all as lovely as you thought it was going to be? Does everybody talk Art and rave about the time when he will 'make a school,' and discuss his 'methods' over bocks and cigarettes? What are you painting now—can we see your studio?"

"Which am I to answer first?" he laughed.

"Talk! Tell me what the life's like."

"It's all right. Yes, some of us do prose about our methods, I'm afraid, and we drink a great many bocks—when we've the money to pay for them; and my Paris isn't a bit like your Paris—it's a different world."

"It must be heavenly. If I'd had any talent I should have loved to go in for it myself. And do you know any clever people besides artists? Authors and actors, I mean? Do you know any people with long hair? Frenchmen seem to go to one extreme or the other—their hair's either waving in the breeze or too short to part. All

Digitized by Google

the people who come here are the cropped and dull ones."

"Kate!"

"Well, they are, Aunt Madge. . . . Do you know Sardou, or Alphonse Daudet, or Sarah Bernhardt?"

He shook his head.

"No. I know one or two English correspondents. I did a piece of newspaper work myself not long ago."

"Really?"

"In collaboration. Gladstone was expected in Paris, and my friend thought he'd like to send an Interview with him to his paper. We wrote it together at one of the tables outside a café on the Boul' Mich' while Gladstone was still travelling towards the gare du Nord. We credited him with some highly interesting views. I don't know if they were ever published."

"Oh!"

"And do you prefer living here to being in London?" inquired Lady Liddington; "or couldn't you work so well at home?"

"I've scarcely thought about it," he said, with a shrug; "this *is* my home now. Oh, I should say London'd be ghastly—unless one were making a big income. For the smaller fry——"

"Dull?"

Digitized by Google

"I shouldn't like it. I've heard about it. A fellow that I know here works for London—black and white work, you know. Oh, rather funny! Did you ever see a magazine called *The Lantern?* It's very earnest—and only sixpence. Last month poor Tassie had to illustrate the line, 'He strolled meditatively through the summer night.' He made the man lighting a cigar. The other day he got his sketch back; the Editor wrote reprovingly that 'in *The Lantern* they didn't smoke.' "

He stayed an hour; and, in the circumstances, could one do less, when he rose, than fix an evening for his dining there? After he had dined there, what was more natural than that he should call?

Two afternoons, a dinner, and a host of mutual memories. The earlier friendship was revived. And Lady Liddington bowed to the inevitable.

They saw him frequently now. He sent tickets to them, and met them to explain the virtues of the pictures. And if the elder woman, failing to understand why magenta cattle should graze on purple grass, sometimes sat down with a headache and left Kate to wander round the room with him alone, was she a chaperon without defence?

They were not in love, but they were in dan-

Digitized by Google

ger. He had begun to look forward to the meetings, and so had the girl. He interested her; she was interesting to him. He had been right in saying that they belonged to different worlds; and that their lives were the antithesis of each other had, itself, a fascination—the deeper for the fact that they had once been so much alike. He knew his Bullier, his Montmartre, the minor studios, and the third-rate cafés; he wasn't unfamiliar with the interior of the nearest mont-de-piété. But of the Paris unfolded to Lady Liddington's niece he knew very little. It was a novel experience to him to see a dinner-table poetised by flowers and a Salviati service. It was even a strange thing to Mallock to be sitting in a room with two ladies and listening to ladies' conversation.

If, as the weeks passed, he told himself that he was being a fool, it must be conceded that the temptation to folly was a strong one; but it must also be acknowledged that he told the truth. He already thought much too often of Miss Ormerod for a man who could not hope to marry her, and yet he continued to see her because he was too weak to stay away.

Then he knew that he loved her. He ceased at last to excuse himself by saying that he found her "companionable," that there was "nothing in

Digitized by Google

it"; he knew that he loved her, that the world was peopled by men, women, and Kate Ormerod; that she stood on a plane by herself—different from everyone else.

Paris now—the Paris that was open to him—stank in his nostrils. When he could not be with her during the day, he worked doggedly, and badly, finding occupation a relief to his impatience; but in the evening, to paint was impossible—and it was in the evening that he ate his heart out.

He had not the fainest right ever to own his feelings to her, and he was aware of it. If he acted properly, he would assert that he had to go to Caudebec or somewhere and say good-bye; but he could not string himself to the necessary pitch.

And, after all, he argued, since he confessed nothing, asked for nothing, why should he deny himself the only happiness that he possessed? Yes, he was passionately in love with her—but, if he didn't say so, what harm did it do? It would end by making him infernally miserable? Well, that was his affair! He would be infernally miserable, anyhow!

However, if the man was not disposed to do his duty, the time had arrived when Lady Liddington had to do hers. One morning, when he called with some tickets and was shown into the

Digitized by Google

drawing-room, she was in it alone, reading a Tauchnitz novel. Kate was practising, he was told; indeed, he could hear the piano.

"I was going to write to you," said Lady Liddington; "we're returning to London."

He stared at her blankly.

"It's an awful bore; we meant to stay quite two months longer. But things pull me back."

"You go soon?"

"To-morrow. And I'm such a shocking sailor."

Miss Ormerod had begun Chopin's Second Nocturne. Mallock listened to a line of it in-that he had turned pale, and that it was essential tensely, without realising he listened. He felt to say something; but his mind refused to yield a commonplace. Lady Liddington, who had avoided plain-speaking with her niece by the same pretext, was no longer confident that the necessity for plain-speaking had been escaped.

"I'm sorry," he said, at last. He played with the book she had put down. . . . "Is it good?" he asked desperately.

"It's a romance. No, stereotyped. A romance always ends with a marriage."

"Isn't that realistic? Marriage is generally the end of romance."

"You're practical, Mr. Mallock."

"Quite the reverse, I'm afraid," he stammered,

Digitized by Google

hot with the sudden fear that she might be imputing mercenary motives.

Their gaze met in a pause, and she answered him gently:

"Ah, well, to be practical is often distressing!"

"This is au revoir, then?" He got up. "Shall I see Miss Ormerod?"

"I don't think she has been told you're here. I'll let her know."

"Please don't trouble! I can say 'good-bye' as I pass the room. I hope you will have a smooth crossing."

He wasn't forbidden, and his face thanked her.

Kate lifted her head as the handle turned.

"You!"

"So you're going away?" he said huskily.

"We go to-morrow." Her voice was nervous.

"Your aunt just told me. I shan't see you any more."

"Not before we leave, I suppose."

"I mayn't see you again at all. Perhaps you won't come back to Paris."

"Oh, yes—some time!"

"I shall miss you horribly. I don't know what I shall do without you."

"We've been very good friends." She stroked a key of the piano slowly. "It seems a long while since we met again."

Digitized by Google

"Good-bye!" said Mallock, jerkily. He put out his hand, and she rose. His misery glowed in his eyes. In hers—but he dared not read them. He caught her hand to his lips and kissed it, and went out. Lady Liddington heard the door close. . . . The nocturne was not resumed.

II

WELL, it was all over! He had never been so wretched in his life. He walked away aimlessly; it was nothing to him where he went. Outside the Grand Hotel he collided with a gentleman hurrying from the courtyard. Both looked round with resentment. The gentleman was his father.

The next instant Mallock realised that his father was in deep mourning. "Good God! My mother—?" he faltered.

"Your mother was never better," exclaimed the other gaily, clapping him on the shoulder; "she sends her love, and a thousand messages! I was on my way to you. Let me look at you. Well, well, well! it is good to see you again, Ernest. You know the news, don't you?"

"News? What news?"

"'What news'? You haven't heard? Prepare yourself!" He chuckled. "Prepare yourself, my boy!"

Digitized by Google

"Something good?"

"It is very sad," returned his father, suddenly assuming an expression of solemnity, "very terrible. But as we have seen nothing of them for so long— My brother and his son are dead—drowned. A yacht accident. Poor Maurice! He had his faults, but—poor Maurice! . . . Let's go inside—you haven't lunched, have you? I'll tell you all about it."

The bohemian listened, half stupefied.

"You're Lord Fernahoe?" he said. "You're Lord Fernahoe now?"

"And you're the Honourable Ernest Mallock. Better than your profession, eh? Not but what you might have a studio still, if you fancied it. It would be rather chic. And all the pretty women could come and have their portraits painted. But, to think you didn't know!"

"I haven't opened a paper for a week. But—but Miss Ormerod's here, with Lady Liddington. It's amazing *they* haven't seen it."

"Well, of course they've seen it!"

"I can swear they haven't. Great heavens, Governor, what a change for you!"

"Yes," said the peer, complacently, "it'll be a change after Coblenz. I've borne my reverses, Ernest, I've never complained; but my health is not what it was. I—I haven't the physique for

Digitized by Google

the life of a poor man." He spoke as if he had been condemned to be a dock-labourer. "How do you think I'm looking?"

"You're looking as well as ever—and as young."

"Nonsense, nonsense! Ha! ha! What'll you drink? We had better have champagne—my doctor advises a glass of champagne. . . . You must order some clothes. You are—you are damned shabby. Go to a tailor to-day; don't forget. What are you doing with yourself this evening?"

"Nothing," said Mallock. "That's to say——"

"Nothing that won't keep. You'll meet me, and we'll have a little dinner together at—Bignon's is gone, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Where do you go, as a rule?"

"I?" He smiled grimly. "I'm afraid my haunts would hardly suit you."

"No, I suppose not. Well, all that's finished. You've grown very handsome, Ernie; you remind me of myself when I was your age. I may say that now—an old man? . . . But you look dazed. It was a horrible affair; poor Maurice! poor Maurice! But don't look so dazed."

"You've staggered me," said Mallock, gulping

Digitized by Google

his wine. "I—I— If you don't mind, I'll leave you now. Where shall we meet?"

"Call for me here," said Fernahoe, airly; "say six o'clock. There are some things I've got to attend to: I have to be shaved, and— By the way, to-morrow I can let you have a substantial sum; in the meanwhile, here's something to go on with—I suppose it'll be useful? Six o'clock, then, sharp. And don't forget the tailor. Ta! ta!"

"Six o'clock. Thanks. I won't be late."

Lorn Fernahoe signed to a cabman. His son stood stupidly on the kerb after the cab had rattled away. His eyes were wide, and his mouth was set. After a minute he crossed the road, and turned down the avenue de l'Opéra, still with the fixed stare. Among the traffic of the rue de Rivoli, he hesitated; he seemed in doubt. Then he shrugged his shoulders, and slouched on—away from fashion, to the place St. Michel. On the boulevard one or two threw him a greeting. He did not know it. His face was grey; now and again he wiped the perspiration from it with a hand that shook. Threading his way through a maze of dilapidated streets, he came to a narrow doorway, next a shop-window packed high with charcoal and wood. There was a flight of dirty stairs, and he mounted them very slowly.

Digitized by Google

The room was bedroom and parlour, too. The bed was in disorder; on the table the remainder of a stew that had been hot two hours ago was stiffening in the gravy. A baby of twelve-months, unkempt, uncared for, lay fretting on a pillow on the floor; and a woman in a flannel dressing-gown sat reading an English novelette. She turned her untidy head, shedding a hair-pin as she moved.

"Oh, here you are!" said Ernest Mallock's wife.

He threw himself on the bed. "I'm here!"

"Have you brought back any money?"

"Take all you want."

"My word!" she exclaimed, with delight. "You're in luck!"

"Yes," he groaned, "I'm devilish lucky!"

She stooped for the fallen hair-pin, and picked her teeth with it.

"Where does it come from? You've never sold that old 'Solitude,' surely?"

"Oh, for God's sake be quiet!" he said, "I'm tired."

"Where have you been? Everything's got cold. Shall I hot it up for you?"

"No, never mind, Bessy."

"It won't take a minute."

"I don't want it."

"How's that?" she asked sullenly.

Digitized by Google

"I had déjeuner out."

"Oh, you had your dirgennay out again! Who with? You've taken to dirgennaying out a good deal, haven't you? Jolly for me, I'm sure—stuck at 'ome with the kid while you're enjoying yourself? Seems to me you're all alike."

"Does it?"

"Yes, it does," she said angrily, imitating his inflexion; "yes, it does, Mr. Sneerer! And I tell you more; I don't believe there's a decent one among the lot of you. Do you hear?"

"Oh?"

"*I* saw you the other day in the rue Scribe, with two women. Very classy they were—to look at. You didn't see *me,* did you? But *I* saw *you!* Who were they? Answer me that."

"They were ladies that I might have known better if I had had more sense."

"I suppose that's meant for *me?* You didn't look at the young one as if you'd like to eat her up, did you?"

"Be quiet!" he burst out. "Now, then, be quiet! I won't have you speak about her. I've had enough!"

"Oh, what a fine gentleman! Not speak about her, eh? His wife mustn't so much as speak about her! We've come to a pretty pass! Listen to your father, my Blessing! And she was no

Digitized by Google

beauty, neither. Find better figures than hers in any life class, for all her swank. Any girl who ain't his wife, that's it! So long as she ain't his wife, any girl's good enough for a man. I could look like it, too, if you gave me the money to do it on. 'Won't have me speak about her'? Who do you think you're talking to? I've a good mind to smack your face!"

He clasped his hands on his head, and lay motionless.

"I'm tired," he repeated, wearily. "For God's sake, shut up! I want to go to sleep."

But it wasn't true—he wanted to think; he wanted to curse himself and die. In memory he was re-living the night of his first meeting with her: an English girl in a divan off the boulevard St. Martin—insulted, on the evening of his presence, by a French student. He recalled the enthusiasm with which he had knocked the man down; the general row—the cry of "English chaps forward!" She wept, and blessed him, on the pavement, at two o'clock in the morning. It transpired that she was virtuous; and he afforded the quarter another example of "the English eccentricity." After reflection, he offered to send her back to London. She had been unhappy there—she wept again, and didn't want to go. He supported her until she found employment

Digitized by Google

as a model. She was pretty; was the end surprising? She thought she was in love with him —let him see as much—and he was in love with romance. Whom had he to study? Life with her would be "very jolly"! It was a boy's infatuation for bohemia, while bohemia was foreign to him. Its front had been delightful. He married her. This was the back of it.

She picked up the paper, and he regarded her under lowered lids. She was pretty still, but he hated every expression on her face. He hated her every attitude, and the notes of her laugh. Every little harmless habit that she had made his nerves ache.

It was half-past four. This evening he would have to confess the truth to his father. How to do it? And he must tell Bessy of her new importance and witness her ecstasies.

The hands of a tawdry French clock crept on. If he meant to keep the appointment, he must go soon!

The novelette engrossed her now. Flies swarmed about the table, settling on the meat. The dirty baby slept. When the clock struck again, Mallock dragged himself from the unmade bed to announce his marriage.

Digitized by Google

THE LADY OF LYONS'

THE jovial solicitor who smacked his clients on the back had absconded, and the minor poet had no longer fifty pounds per annum. Although he was a minor poet, which—strangely enough—is a term of contempt in this country, though we are enjoined to be grateful for even small mercies, he was as human as minor novelists and minor critics, and he suffered. Also he woke; he realised how small had been the world's demand for the wares in which he dealt—he acknowledged that for twenty years he had been living on his little income, not on his little books.

His name was Smith. It was, perhaps, one of the reasons why his poetry was unread. Only a reviewer possessed of unusual courage could have discovered "the great poetry of Mr. Smith." Only a poet devoid of commercial instincts could have failed to adopt a nom de guerre.

In the face of disaster Mr. Smith did not make precisely this reflection, but he reflected painfully that a lack of commercial ability was no longer a matter to be recognised with a smile. He stood among the daffodils in the village garden, and

Digitized by Google

asked Heaven what would become of him. He was seven-and-thirty; the only craft that he had learnt was useless; and he had to earn his bread-and-cheese.

As Heaven returned no answer, he sought the advice of friends. He was a lovable creature, though a writing man, and his friends were sympathetic. They all invited him to dinner, and assured him warmly that they would bear his necessities in mind. If anything turned up, he might rely upon their telegraphing to him. Being of a trustful disposition, Mr. Smith returned to the daffodils, encouraged.

And they withered while he waited for a telegram.

When they hung their heads, he sought advice again. This time his friends did not invite him to dinner, but they pointed out to him, lest he should overlook it, that he was a poet—in other words, that he was a difficult person to serve. "You have no experience, you see," they said frankly. "You are intelligent, but you have no experience, Robert." When a man is untravelled in the groove that we ourselves tread, we say that he has "no experience."

One afternoon the poet went abroad. The journey cost him a penny, and he travelled from Charing Cross as far as the Bank. He was bound

Digitized by Google

for an office in Lombard Street, and as he called by appointment, a clerk showed him promptly to Mr. Hutton's private room.

The business man who received him had once been a little boy in a sailor suit, and he and Robert had played together in a nursery. To-day he had numerous financial irons in the fire, and one of them required an obedient gentleman to watch it. Affection suggested Robert for the post. The duties were simple, and the salary was slight, but if the iron came out in good condition, there was to be a slice of the iron, too.

They chatted for a long while. Robert was admitted to some confidences about the other irons—the patents, and the shares, and the concessions. All the time that he listened he was seeing the business man as a little boy in a sailor suit again, and was awestruck to hear the little boy talking so glibly of such mysteries. Blankly he felt that he himself had omitted to grow up; he decided that people were right in declaring that he had no experience; it appeared to him suddenly that he had learnt nothing in his life. But, of course, he had learnt many things, though never the most important one—how to make money.

Often they were interrupted by the telephone bell, and during one of the colloquies on the tele-

Digitized by Google

phone Mr. Hutton seemed depressed. Robert feared he was being browbeaten until he hung up the receiver, and announced, smiling, that he had "made five hundred pounds by that conversation." It was miraculous. Robert had not made five hundred pounds by twenty years of work.

"Let's go out and get a cup of coffee," said Mr. Hutton, and piloted the poet through a maze of alleys to a retiring doorway. "What will you have to drink?" The poet discovered that after two o'clock "a cup of coffee" in the City is generally a synonym for a whisky-and-soda.

The little bar was crowded, and he was surprised at seeing such a number of business men doing nothing so leisurely. One man to whom he was introduced asked him if he knew how the "House" closed, but he did not even know what it meant. They discoursed in groups, and a strange language; Robert was flooded by compassion for the barmaid. All expounded different views, and all the views were equally unintelligible to him. The only point of unanimity he perceived was the wisdom of having "a fiver each way." As often as anybody entered, the several groups waved hands, and the newcomer accepted a whisky-and-soda with a piece of lemon in it, among the group he fancied best. On leaving,

Digitized by Google

Mr. Hutton remarked that he had "sometimes made as much as a thousand pounds by dropping in there." Robert reeled.

Soon he went every day to the strange land where man talked a language that he did not know. It had been decided that he should watch the iron in the neighbourhood, so that Mr. Hutton might extend a guiding hand without discomfort, and an office was rented in Eastcheap. Eastcheap is a sour-smelling thoroughfare into which dirty loafers emerge from the courts of Billingsgate in order that they may have more room to spit. Distressing as Robert found it to sit in the office, he found it more distressing to go out.

Of course not many people see the City. Myriads saw it once, but that was when they came there in their youth. Few are to be discovered in the City who remember how it looks. Occasionally a clerk in his first berth may be found who sees the City, but he is not promised to the casual searcher, for City clerks as a body are observant in the streets of one thing only. They observe neckties. This passion, to which the hosiers of the district pander inordinately, was displayed to the poet between the hours of one and two, wet or fine. From desk to food, from food to desk, streamed the black multiude,

Digitized by Google

expressionless, torpid and unseeing, until neckties flaunted in a window; then the vacant faces brightened, and there was a block. The rule of the pavement is known everywhere excepting in the City, where it is most needed; but at the hosiers' windows pedestrianism became more than an effort—it became a feat.

Robert's eyes had no custom in them; Robert did see the City, and he was unhappier than he had poetry to tell; for that matter, he did not try to tell it. He wrote nothing now but figures, and commercially ungrammatical epistles which took him a long time to compose. For twenty years he had believed his rushlight was a star—he had done with illusion at last. Illusion was in its grave, and the Failure laid his hope of laurels on the top. Yet he thought tenderly of Illusion. The funeral was over, but he mourned. He had embraced a new career, but he did not love it. Although he repeated that the past was dead, he could not prevent its ghost haunting Eastcheap. There were moments when it chilled the iron.

Often, as he forced his dreary way to luncheon, it walked beside him. He lunched sometimes with his preserver in the restaurants of the Employers. Generally he lunched with the ghost in the restaurants of the Employed. He noted that in the former the meat was tainted less frequently.

Digitized by Google

On the other hand, the Employed were served by clean, quiet girls instead of by sleezy, vociferous waiters.

One afternoon he lunched at an establishment that he had not tried before. The ghost had been insistent all the morning. He found a vacant seat, hung up his hat, and examined the bill of fare. He was in one of the more modest restaurants of Messrs. Lyons, and around him young men and women with blank faces chumped beefsteak pudding, and read sixpenny editions of the novels that are written for them. The girl beside him ordered apple-tart. Her voice was pleasant, and momentarily he regretted that in reading she leant her cheek upon her palm, for she hid her profile. It should have been a pretty profile, to match her voice. Moved by an impulse of curiosity, he glanced at the page she pondered, and then he dropped the menu: she was reading his own verse!

"Good God!" he exclaimed.

"I *beg* your pardon?" said the girl, surveying him with dignity.

"I apologise," stammered the poet; "I was startled."

Evidently she found his excuse inadequate, and he was thankful that at this moment they were left with the table to themselves. "I meant

Digitized by Google

that I was startled to see the book you were reading," he explained.

"I see nothing startling in it," said the lady, still frigid.

He felt that she might have expressed herself more happily, but hew as in no position to rebuke her. "Of course in one sense it isn't startling at all," he concurred; "in fact, it's very feeble."

"I am afraid I can't agree with you," rejoined his reader; and the haughtiness of her contradiction warmed his heart.

"You can't mean you really like it?"

"I like it very much." She had grey eyes that challenged him scornfully; he sunned himself in her disdain.

"Did you buy it?" he asked, a tremor in his tone.

"Really—!" she began. But his air was so respectful that she added the next instant, "Yes, for twopence, second-hand."

"Ah!" said the poet. "Still, it's a most extraordinary occurrence."

She looked away from him with a frown; her attention was divided between his verse and the apple-tart. Robert sat a prey to tempation. To melt her by avowing himself would be ridiculous, but agreeable. Succumbing, he murmured:

Digitized by Google

"To tell you the truth, I am glad you like the book."

"Eh?" she said. "Why?"

"Because I wrote it."

It should have been a dramatic moment, but the girl bungled her part and disbelieved him.

Fully five minutes were devoted to convincing her. However, the five minutes brought such a flutter of pink to her cheeks, so tender a glow into her eyes, that the time was by no means wasted.

"I couldn't expect to meet a poet in the City," she pleaded.

"And certainly I couldn't expect to meet any Gentle Reader here," said Robert. He examined the slim volume ruefully.

"In such good condition, and only twopence!" he complained.

"If it had been more I mightn't have bought it," she said.

He found himself resigned to the book's having been marked down to twopence.

She told him that she wrote shorthand in an office in Cornhill. Eastcheap lay in the same direction, and after she had gone he felt that it would have been pleasurable to walk some of the way beside her.

Digitized by Google

He was sorry, too, that he had omitted to inquire if she irradiated the restaurant daily.

On the morrow he betook himself to Lyons' with hope. He descried the lady at a distant table, and it had the charm of vacant chairs. There was no reason why he should ignore them.

"You are often in the City, then?" she asked as he sat down.

"I come every day," said Robert; and seeing she was mystified, he added, "I am in an office here, like you."

But plainly this mystified her more still. "Do you mean you are in business?"

"Truly," he told her. "I think I shall have roast-beef."

"I should try the mutton," she said. "But you are a poet?"

"I used to fancy myself one."

It was very absurd, but before they paid their bills he was informing her that he had divorced his Muse, and was in a foreign land alone. This time they left the restaurant together.

"That, O foreigner," said the lady of Lyons', "is the Royal Exchange!"

"I know," said Robert. "But what do they exchange in it?"

"I have no idea," she confessed. "If you like, we will ask a policeman."

Digitized by Google

"A curious thing about policemen," remarked the poet, "is that if you want a polite answer, you should avoid putting your question politely. They are, conspicuously, a class who respect rudeness. How long have you been coming to the City, to learn so much about it?"

"I have been coming to the City for nine years," she said, "and I have learnt a great deal. I know now where the Tower is, and which of the benches under the trees makes you feel most Harrison Ainsworthy. And I know the shop in Cornhill that sells the best twopenny tarts. They are small, but peerless."

"If you hadn't bought my verses you might have had another," sighed Robert. "Some day, when I have made my fortune, I shall give you one."

"Thank you," she said. "I suppose you know what you are looking at across the road?"

"I am looking at a bookshop," replied the poet.

"You were meant to see the Mansion House," demurred his guide, "where the Lord Mayor lives."

"I do not like Lord Mayors," said Robert; "they never ask me to their literary dinners."

"They are punished for it," said the girl. "Once a year at midnight they drop their little

Digitized by Google

glass slippers, and their beautiful coach turns back into a pumpkin."

"It serves them right," said the poet vengefully.

But they were not always so foolish as this. To meet at luncheon became their custom, and sometimes their confidences were quite practical. By dint of lunching hurriedly on occasion, they made time to reach the Tower together, and he approved her taste in benches. It was on the bench one day when the sun shone that she told him her history. Her history was so commonplace that she apologised for relating it, and her surprise was vast that he fell to reverie.

"Why," he cried, "we have found a Moral! It is you who are to be pitied, not I. What have *I* to mourn in the City? I have buried nothing here but the gift of making little verses. But *you*, you have buried the divinest gift of the gods, your beautiful youth! You have never had any pleasure in your life, yet you are content. I am ashamed."

Not long afterwards his preserver exclaimed:

"Bobbie, I think you're getting acclimatised. You're putting your back into it—if you don't take care you'll make money!"

"I aim at making money," said the poet with

Digitized by Google

commercial staidness; and added, irresponsibly, "I want to buy twopenny tarts."

It was just like him, to bid farewell to verse-making, and then to find his best poetry in the City. There are dreamers who would turn every opportunity to disadvantage.

But the iron is shaping so well that when it becomes a limited liability company with another manager, Robert's slice should be substantial.

We may imagine him going back to the daffodils.

It is not impossible that there will be orange blossoms.

And in the meantime there is certainly the luncheon hour.

Digitized by Google

THE THIRD M

OTTO VAN NORDEN wrote ballads that were popular; but to attain this eminence he had, in his youth, sacrificed commercial prospects which might easily have provided him with wealth. So he often lamented his choice of a career as a terrible mistake. Nevertheless, as he had some private means, his life was no martyrdom, though he aspired vainly to a mansion and a motor. He had pleasant rooms, a good tailor, was frequently to be seen at the second-best restaurants, and spent as much of his time as possible on the Continent. It was, indeed, Van Norden who shocked the owner of a Confession-book by describing his favourite pastime as "Leaving England," and his pet aversion as "Coming back to it."

At the age of forty he fell seriously in love. He was a selfish man, though he inclined to lyrics like "Heaven were a Void without Thee," and "My Life for My Lady's Glove," and he battled against the temptation bravely. Violet was young, captivating, and sang his ballads with considerable expression—he had really no chance. He took a wife, and a villa in Dulwich; and if the

Digitized by Google

music pirates hadn't begun to be so industrious, it is possible that he might have escaped regret, even in the suburb that looks like a cemetery.

To write popular songs in a country where stolen music was exposed for sale on every kerb-stone buttered no parsnips; and for matrimony the composer's private means were a tight fit. Not many quarter-days had elapsed before he felt that his marriage had been as big a blunder as his profession. "Music and marriage!" sighed Van Norden to the long, sad, empty roads of Dulwich; "but for music and marriage how well off I might have been!" And then it struck him that both the calamities of his life begun with an M.

Some men might have attached no importance to it; Otto Van Norden was impressed. He said that it was queer, this recurrence of the initial M —he was of the opinion that it "meant something." Perhaps there was a warning to be derived? Yes, that must be it! If a third catastrophe occurred, doubtless the third, too, would be alliterative—and perhaps fatal. M was evidently an initial ominous to him, an initial to be shunned. From that moment he grew nervous of things beginning with an M. He abandoned the wish to revisit Mentone; and he would not have attempted a march if his publishers had begged for one.

Digitized by Google

More quarter-days flashed by, and meanwhile his fortunes remained unchanged. Self-respecting citizens still bought the stolen music, the private income was still a tight fit, and Dulwich was still the most melancholy of the suburbs. Then, when he had been married for three annual rentals, and a water-rate over, hopes were entertained of a son and heir—and Violet suggested calling him "Marmaduke." The composer was profoundly agitated; her proposal was no caprice—she had an uncle Marmaduke with money—and Van Norden knew very well that opposition must appear to her unreasonable, since he could not explain it without hurting her feelings.

He contested the point with tact. Kindly, but firmly, he disparaged the name of "Marmaduke" for months, all through the spring in fact. It was a name, he pointed out, more adapted to an elderly gentleman of portly presence than to a baby. It was not a tractable name, not amenable to abbreviation. Assuming that the child had a sensitive disposition, Violet would condemn him to years of suffering, for a boy who was christened "Marmaduke" would, when he went to school, certainly be called "Marmalade." The last argument was at once successful; Violet's eyes filled with tears, and as she thanked her husband for sparing the "poor little fellow" the con-

Digitized by Google

sequences of her thoughtlessness, the composer's relief was deeper than any who mock presentiments can understand.

This was the first M that had menaced him since he perceived the significance of the initial to him, and nothing else noteworthy occurred until November. One day in November when a pink-and-white bassinette was in readiness for the little "fellow's" advent, the master of the house awoke feeling as if he had a marble under his tongue. He did not mention the matter to Violet, but breakfasting with such an unfamiliar mouth was so discomforting that he sent the servant up to Dr. Lachlan with a request to him to look in during the morning.

"I don't know what's happened to my mouth, Lachlan," he said; "it's for all the world as if a marble had rolled underneath my tongue in the night."

"Let's have a look at it," said the medical man. "Ah! Yes. Y-e-s, that hasn't come in the night —it's been coming for some time."

"Is it serious?"

"No, not necessarily. It wants removing."

"Removing?" echoed Van Norden. "What do you mean by 'removing'—you don't mean 'operating'? Don't you think a—a good lotion ——?"

Digitized by Google

"Oh, no, we shall have to operate," said Dr. Lachlan. "You may put it at the morning after next. Meantime, I'll get a competent anæsthetist, and arrange about a nurse for you."

"But—but it's very serious indeed," faltered the composer, dismayed. "Am I sure to get better? People sink under operations; we know that every operation is 'performed successfully,' but the patient often dies the same day. What's the matter with me, what have I got?"

"It's what we call 'Myxoma.' "

"My God!" exclaimed Van Norden. "It begins with an M!"

He was now intensely alarmed for himself. He was also alarmed lest the news should reach the ears of Violet, who was in no condition to be told such things. However, on the next morning but one she was unable to rise, so the preliminaries passed unnoticed by her. In a room on the first floor, madame awaited the arrival of the son and heir; in a room on the second, monsieur awaited the arrival of the surgeon. Few circumstances could have been more adverse to marital tranquillity: few circumstances therefore could have been less favourable to the operation.

The first person to tap at the second-floor door was the nurse engaged by Dr. Lachlan.

"Good-morning, Nurse," said Van Norden.

Digitized by Google

"Nobody has come yet; sit down and make yourself at home."

"Thank you," said the nurse. She added sympathetically, putting on her apron. "It's a trying time for you, I hear, what with one thing and another, sir?"

Lachlan came in, as blithely as if it were a party. "Well, how are we this morning?" he asked. "Good spirits? That's right! You'll be glad you've had this done—you'll feel much better, once it's over.—Ah, here's the man I'm waiting for! 'Morning, Major."

"Er, Dr. Major, pleased to meet you," murmured the composer, feebly untruthful. Already the bedroom was taking a strange aspect to him, the aspect of a hospital. Bandages and bottles seemed to have sprung from nowhere. Lachlan poured fluids briskly in basins before the window, and Major set out mysterious articles from a black bag on the chest of drawers. The paraphernalia spread incessantly, and the nurse continued, as if by magic, to produce sheets, and cans of hot water without having quitted the room.

"I think we'll move the bed, Nurse," said Lachlan, and they pulled it into the middle of the floor. The anæsthetist felt the patient's pulse, and applied the stethoscope; and Van Norden noticed for the first time that the pattern of the

Digitized by Google

wall-paper resembled pink mushrooms in bunches of vermicelli.

An oppressive "tent" was placed over his mouth. He felt very helpless, very childish all at once. The vapour of the "A.C.E." grew suffocating; his heart began to thump as if it would burst. He signalled the danger to Lachlan, and Lachlan gave a nod. Van Norden glared impotently—he was sure that he was the victim of a blunder, that this pounding of the heart was too violent to be safe. Now there was a roaring in his ears. The idiots were killing him—and he was gagged, defenceless! Momentarily he was faint with terror, and then a lethargy which he mistook for courage stole through him; it flattered his vanity to perceive with what listlessness he confronted death. He was being a hero! . . . It was not unpleasant—it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Nothing mattered in the least.

His next impression was of being very cramped. In the mist of his consciousness there lurked the remembrance of the operation, and he assumed vaguely that it was over. He lay waiting to be congratulated, wondering why nobody spoke to him. Had he been left alone? He felt so bewilderingly limp that he couldn't turn, but he opened his mouth to say, "Are you there, Lachlan?" and to his horror, emitted nothing but

Digitized by Google

a baby's bleat. His mouth remained open with amazement, and gigantic fingers suddenly thrust something sickening into it, while an unfamiliar voice made ridiculous noises at him.

Consternation held Van Norden spellbound. There were seconds in which he feared that he was insane. Presently another thought assailed him, one so startling that his blood ran cold. Minutes passed, minutes too terrible for words to paint. He gathered the fortitude to examine as much of his person as was exposed: the hands belonging to him were minute, the hands of an infant! He stared at them aghast and shuddering. There could be no doubt of it—he had died under the operation, and had been born again! All that was natural enough, but the unforeseen and fearful thing was that he still remembered.

He was once more a baby. Whose? The immense import of the question throbbed in him. Where he lay he could see no more of the room than the ceiling, and he was unable to judge whether he had been reincarnated in a mansion or a hovel. There had been a royal princess expecting a baby, he reflected. "Great Scotland Yard!" thought Van Norden, "suppose I'm Royalty this time?" But the remaining pessimism in him rejected the fancy almost as it rose. "Too good to be true," he mused; "I expect my fa-

Digitized by Google

ther's a beggarly artist, or a curate—I don't suppose I'm even an only child. It's a ghastly situation—I wonder at what age one begins to forget?"

The woman with the gigantic fingers—or fingers comparatively gigantic—was speaking to someone now, and Van Norden listened intently, in the hope of ascertaining something of his prospects.

"Yes," said the woman, "and her, too, poor soul—don't know anything about it yet of course! They won't tell her for days. He died a moment before the mite was born. Wrote songs and such like. Yes, they say the operation was quite successful, but he didn't rally—too weak, you know. Oh, awfully sad!"

"Grant me patience!" thought Van Norden; "I might have known it—I'm in that damned house in Dulwich still!"

"A quiet little thing, poor orphan, ain't it?" the monthly nurse went on; and then she leant over the cradle and made the ridiculous noise at him again. In a burst of fury, Van Norden tried to swear at her, but he could produce only the baby's bleat. He yearned to be quiet, to be left undisturbed—there was so much to consider. He had allowed his life-policy to lapse, and now he bitterly repented the false economy. He won-

Digitized by Google

dered what the furniture would fetch, and if Violet would be enabled to bring him up properly. Perhaps his father-in-law would come to her assistance?—his "grandfather," he ought to say now! It would be a pretty kettle of fish if his widow—that was to say his "mother"—were left to her own resources. What would become of him? A board school, and a junior clerkship! "I suppose it's entirely problematical whether I shall even inherit my musical talent?" mused the unhappy infant. "It's a nice lookout for me, I must say!"

"But there," added the woman, "a girl baby always does keep quieter than a boy—I'm always thankful to see it a girl. Ookytooky, then! Ain't I, my precious? Lor, the blessed lamb's choking!"

Van Norden had indeed turned purple in the face. A girl! Culminating calamity, a girl! The blankness of the girl's outlook, the poverty of the marriage that she must expect to make, was overwhelming. "Now, why," Van Norden asked herself passionately, "*why* has this thing happened to me? Among all the births that were taking place in the world, couldn't they have spared me a decent one? I don't harp on a palace, but, say, reasonable advantages? Opulent people are having sons every minute, yet *I* must

Digitized by Google

go as the daughter of a widow in straitened circumstances. Upon my soul, it's heartrending!"

However, when she and Violet met again she was somewhat consoled by the warmth of her mother's welcome; and after the news of the bereavement was broken, the young widow cooed so tenderly of the manifold virtues of "darling papa" that Van Norden was quite touched. "A good sort!" meditated Van Norden, as Violet joggled her up and down; "I had no idea at the time that she appreciated me so much."

In hours of comparative resignation there was nothing more fascinating to Van Norden, while she lay in the pink-and-white bassinette, than to mark the development of her new identity—the process by which the trivial pains and pleasures of the moment attained supreme importance, and the pressing anxieties which beset her at the hour of her birth became gradually blurred. The fact would have appeared incredible to the baby formerly had she heard with how little fret and jar the human mind adapted itself to another form and sex; she would not have believed the Ego could renounce so easily its interest in matters that, to its previous incarnation, had been absorbing. And doubtless, she reflected, she would disbelieve it again later!

Her attitude towards the bottle, for instance,

Digitized by Google

fascinated her extremely. At first she had regarded it with disdain. Even when she recognised its suitability to her physical needs, she had merely tolerated the thing as a disagreeable necessity. This contempt, this suction under protest, was very brief. Soon she grew to relish the bottle, to clamour for it when it was late. Then, too, she was able to extract amusement from a coral-and-bells, and was again engrossed by the ticking of a watch. "Marvellous!" thought Van Norden, while she hovered at the parting of the ways, "marvellous thing, Nature, upon my word!" But, a trifle humiliated at moments like these, she would throw the coral, or watch, on the floor and set up a howl. The devoted Violet often mistook the humiliation for a pin, and undressed her—an indignity which annoyed Van Norden more still.

Before she was six weeks old Van Norden had ceased to consider the financial position, and accepted without questioning who provided; she began to yield to the charm of the bottle and the watch unreservedly, and had scarcely a remaining care. Only while she plucked at Violet's crape, the past whispered in her, and a dim consciousness that the relations between her mother and herself were involved clouded the infantile brow.

"What's she thinking about, a love?" Violet

Digitized by Google

would murmur, swaying her to and fro. "Doesn't she look worried, a pet!" And from the lap that was once Van Norden's wife's, Van Norden would raise great eyes to her solemnly.

When eight or nine months had passed, this glimmer of memory, which had then become nearly extinct, was fanned to ardour by a painful circumstance. They had gone to Dieppe with Violet's parents, and in the hotel Violet made the acquaintance of a Major somebody. The acquaintance had progressed when Van Norden was first brought in contact with him in the garden, and the gentleman paid the pretty widow marked attentions, and grinned at her baby propitiatingly.

"Jolly little chap," remarked the Major, worrying Van Norden with a forefinger.

"It's a little girl, Major," said Violet, smiling reproval.

"Oh, confound it all! I mean how stupid of me!" faltered the Major. "Lovely little thing, anyhow. I suppose you're awfully proud of her, Mrs. Van Norden, eh? The only pebble on the beach, what? It seems awfully rum to see you with a baby though—you look such a girl, don't you know."

"What nonsense!" said Violet, blushing; "I'm an elderly woman if one counts one's age by one's

Digitized by Google

troubles." She glanced significantly at her weeds, and sighed.

"Oh, ah, of course I understand; I—I can sympathise, I can indeed. But you shouldn't think of your troubles too much, Mrs. Van Norden, if I may say so—you should buck up. Life, after all, is——" He struggled with his eyeglass and failed to enunciate his sentiments on life.

"Life is very, very strange," said Violet, gazing pensively at the sea.

"Isn't it?" said the Major eagerly. "Just fancy, it's only a week since I met you, what?"

"Oh, I wasn't thinking of that," she murmured.

"*I* am," said the Major, "I think of it lots. It seems so rum, don't you know, that I'd never seen you till a week ago. Don't you think that sometimes people meet who were meant to meet, and that, for them, a week scores more than years and years of society between people who er—well, who only happen to meet because they're introduced, don't you know?"

Van Norden lay communing with herself. In the little brain the voice of the past cried for recognition. She eyed the adults darkly, agitated by the sense of a tragedy which she sought piteously to define. The soul of the baby sprawling on the cushions was symptomatic of marital jealousy, though the mind failed to diagnose the dis-

Digitized by Google

ease. Distressed and puzzled, Van Norden burst into startling screams, and kicked her little limbs about furiously. Violet was unable to pacify her; and, much alarmed, was about to dispatch the Major for the nurse when, through the windows of the salon, came the prelude to a song, and someone began to sing "Heaven were a Void without Thee." The baby's paroxysm ceased almost at once; her gaze grew wide. Striking her ear when it did, the ballad that she had created in her preceding incarnation revivified her consciousness of the former life. The veil was rent; the female infant was at heart a husband—and looking in the faces of Violet and her new lover, Van Norden remembered all.

She could say nothing—speech was not yet granted to her—could not proclaim, "I am Otto," though she beheld her widow wooed by another man. Life holds no moment more terrible than an experience like this. Nor did her agony fade with her banishment from the scene. On the contrary, her helplessness intensified her sufferings; too young as yet to toddle, incapable of intruding where she wished, Van Norden was constantly racked by tortures of the imagination. Consumed with jealousy, and craving to be in the salon, she was compelled to lie fuming in her cot—or was strapped in her perambulator while her frenzied

Digitized by Google

fancy followed Violet and the Major into the Casino.

Soon she employed the only weapon in her power, and kicked and screamed as often as an attempt was made to remove her from Violet's presence. By this means she witnessed much that would otherwise have been hidden from her—was indeed a witness of her successor's proposal. Stricken with resentment, the babe that had once been the widow's husband lay in her lap while the Major begged her to be his wife.

"I know it's a bit early for me to speak," he stammered, "but I can't help it—if I were to let you go away without telling you how much I care for you, I might never see you again. Only give me a word—I'll wait. I'll be as patient as I can, but tell me that there's a chance for me."

She was silent a long while; evidently she was much moved. At last she murmured, "I don't know what to say."

"Can't you care a bit for me?"

"Ah, it isn't that!" she owned tearfully.

"Darling! Dearest!"

"Sh!" she said, "you oughtn't. It's so soon; and—oh, I don't know, there's so much to consider. There's my child." She clasped Van Norden protectively.

"You don't suppose I'd be rough on it?" cried

Digitized by Google

the Major. "Why, I give you my word—just as if it were my own. Violet, in a few months' time? Will you marry me in a few months' time?"

He leant lower, and she raised her gaze; the next instant they had kissed across Van Norden's head. All the rekindled manhood in the infant's consciousness flamed to avenge the outrage, burned to strike the supplanter down, to destroy him. The disparity between the virile impulse and the tiny frame was maddening. Purpling with shame and indignation, Van Norden reared to spit at him, but could only dribble.

The human brain at the age of nine months is incapable of supporting a strain of this degree. Soon afterwards Violet had to send in hot haste for a medical man. After an examination, he spoke gravely of removing something.

"'Removing' something? You don't mean 'operating'?"

"Yes, we shall have to operate," answered the doctor.

There was a morning when a hospital nurse came to the cot, putting on an apron, and the surgeon followed. Violet and the Major were present, the Major soothing her.

"I think we'll move the bed," said the surgeon;

Digitized by Google

and Van Norden lay staring through the window at the brilliant sky.

The room began to acquire a novel air. The nurse produced sheets and cans of hot water from nowhere; the surgeon poured fluids in basins briskly. The Major set out mysterious articles from a black bag on the chest of drawers. The sky developed a pattern of pink mushrooms and bunches of vermicelli—and Van Norden came to his senses.

He saw Lachlan looking at him.

"Well, how do you feel?" asked Lachlan. "We've got rid of your Myxoma for you. And your wife's first-rate. You've a little son waiting downstairs—fine boy, too!"

"Fine boy?" murmured the composer drowsily. "No, I was a fine girl."

"Not quite come round yet, Nurse," said Lachlan; "let him sleep the rest of it off, and he'll be as right as rain!"

Digitized by Google

THE BISHOP'S COMEDY

I

THE Bishop of Westborough had seldom found himself in a more delicate position. Since Sweetbay objected so strenuously to its rector being a dramatist, Sweetbay was clearly no place for the rector; and it devolved upon his lordship to intimate the fact. But secretly his lordship was also guilty of dramatic authorship, and instalments of his comedy were even now in the hands of that accomplished actress, Miss Kitty Clarges. For this reason, and another, the Bishop had wakeful nights.

However, he did what was required. With all his customary blandness, and perhaps a shade more, he pointed out to the Rev. Baker Barling that the parish of Sweetbay was unsuitable for him, and offered him instead a living which commended itself to the Barlings not at all. Indeed, Mrs. Baker Barling was so highly incensed by the removal, that the rector had on several occasions to say "My dear!" to her reprovingly.

The Bishop was young for a bishop. His

Digitized by Google

classical features, and the dignity of his carriage, would have compelled attention even if he had been a mere man. He never said anything noteworthy, but he voiced the sentiments of the unthinking in stately language. This made him generally admired. It is not to be inferred that he was insincere—he had been granted a popular mind; he shared with the majority a strong aversion from disagreeable truths. His widest reflections were bounded by the word "Unpleasant," and every truth that was unpleasant was to the Bishop of Westborough "one of those things that are better left undiscussed." He had a warm affection for this phrase, which occurred in all his articles for the cultured reviews. It was a phrase that suggested much earnestness of thought, while it spared him the exertion of thinking at all.

Domestically he had been no less fortunate than in his mental limitations. He possessed a little wife, who listened to him with the utmost patience, and he had seen both his girls make brilliant matches in their first season. The history of the bridegroom had, in each case, been "one of those things that are better left undiscussed." Accordingly, the Bishop boasted a grateful heart; in fact when he reflected how abundantly Providence had blessed him, he was

Digitized by Google

more than normally horrified to think of the impious murmurings of the poor.

That a personage of his environment and disposition had been tempted towards so unepiscopal a course as writing a comedy, proves how true it is that nothing happens but the unforeseen. It was one of the speediest conquests of Miss Clarge's career—a career in which peers had been plentiful, but prelates had hitherto been lacking. He had made her acquaintance at a reception—she was clever off the stage as well as on it and had always tempered her indiscretions with tact; duchesses called her "dear." He thought her the most fascinating woman he had ever met, and talked to her about the conditions of the English stage with considerable satisfaction to himself.

"What a dramatist your lordship would have made if you had not been a bishop!" she murmured, with rapt eyes.

"Oh—er—you are jesting," said the Bishop, asking for more.

"No, indeed—I mean it," returned the lady reverently. "You have what we call the 'sense of the theatre.' And it is so rare! You startled me just now—you know by intuition things that the professional dramatist needs years of experience to find out. I can't tell you how extraordin-

Digitized by Google

ary it is!" She regarded him as if she were being confronted by a miracle.

Partly because he was very vain, and partly because Miss Clarges was very good-looking, the lie that she forgot almost as soon as it was spoken had lingered caressingly with the Bishop. Sitting in the Palace one afternoon with nothing to do, he found himself scribbling "Act I.—A Drawing Room." He had no definite intention of continuing, still less had he a definite plot; but like everyone who is deficient in self-criticism, he wrote with prodigious facility, and his first act was finished in a few days.

Miss Clarges had been a good deal surprised to receive a semi-humorous note from the Bishop of Westborough, reminding her of their conversation and hinting that he would be glad to have her opinion of "a dramatic bantling." Tea and a tête-à-tête followed in the lady's boudoir. She found Act I all that she had dreaded, and told him it was most original. Beaming with importance, he perpetrated Act II, and read her that. She was contemplating a season of management, and in sanguine moments reflected that a practised hand might knock the Bishop's comedy into something like shape, and that the Bishop's name on the bills would be well worth having. So she offered various suggestions about the leading

Digitized by Google

part, and was at home as often as he chose to call—and for some weeks he had chosen to call very often indeed.

Remember that he was only fifty. He had married when he was twenty-five, married a girl who was taken by his handsome face, and who brought him a very respectable dower. Though the dower had fascinated him more than the girl, the courtship had comprised his sentimental experiences. As has been said, he had had no reason to complain of his choice—he had been remarkably successful in all his relationships—he felt that his wife worshipped him, and her worship, and his worldly progress, had contented him fully. But now, for the first time in his career, he was thrown into intimate association with a woman who had captivated those who were seeing life, and those who had seen it—and the Bishop of Westborough fell in love with her as violently as many wiser men had done before him.

As for her, it was the first time in the woman's career that she had been openly admired by a bishop. At the beginning she was attracted by his reputation—much as her youngest adorers had been attracted by her own—but presently she was attracted by his homage. He appealed to her one weakness, her vanity. Though she thought it a pity that he wanted to write a com-

Digitized by Google

edy, she considered him a great man; his profound belief in himself, supported by a nation's esteem, imposed on her. To have made a conquest of a pillar of the Church flattered her inordinately; the novelty of the situation had its effect on the actress, too—and, to her unspeakable amazement, Kitty Clarges fell in love with the Bishop.

It was at this juncture that circumstances had forced him to mortify the rector of Sweetbay.

"The affair makes me doubt whether I ought to proceed with my own play," he admitted to her one afternoon.

"My dear friend!" She meant "What rot!" but she no longer said "What rot!" even to other actresses; and she wore dove-coloured gowns, and had been to hear him preach. The higher life was a little trying, but she liked to feel worthier of him.

"My action in the matter may be misconstrued. Of course, I've simply deferred to the local prejudice, but it may be thought that *I* disapprove of the man's tendencies. If I figured as a dramatist myself a little later, I might be placed in an ambiguous position. . . . Perhaps we might overcome the difficulty by a pseudonym?"

She looked blank. "Your lordship's name will

Digitized by Google

be a draw; I'm afraid a pseudonym would mean waiving a great deal."

"Financially? The pecuniary result is not important to me."

But it was important to her. "If the secret were really kept, you'd be waiving all the kudos too," she added.

"Well, we must consider," said the Bishop, clinking the ice in his glass; "you shall advise me—though I fear I'm exceeding an author's privileges. By the way, does the manageress always offer the author a whisky-and-soda?"

"She offered you an alternative," said Miss Clarges, laughing; "the whisky-and-soda was your choice. But you don't really mean to throw the comedy up, do you? Think of poor me!"

The Bishop's eyes were eloquent. "Thinking of you," he said, after a lingering gaze, "I have this to say: you will be put to considerable expense in bringing out my work, and, novice as I am, I'm aware that a theatre is a heavy speculation; if I withhold the advantage of my name from the piece, I shall claim to share your risk."

"You are very generous, dear friend; I don't think I could say 'yes' to that."

"It is no more than fair."

"I'd rather not. I—I shouldn't care for you to find money for me!" said Kitty Clarges—and

Digitized by Google

was conscious that she had soared into the higher life indeed.

"You are scarcely treating me as the dear friend you allow me to believe myself," urged the Bishop, missing the greatest compliment of his life.

"Oh!" she said under her breath.

"I should be serving my own ends. And besides——"

"Besides—what?"

"It would make me very happy to think that I served *you*."

Her eyelids fell. "You *have* served me."

"I rejoice to hear it. May I ask how?"

"You've served me by your friendship. You've given me different thoughts, taken me out of myself, done me good—in some ways." She sighed deeply. "I've learnt that there are so much *realer* things than the shams that satisfied me before we met. I've been a very . . . worldly woman; you know, don't you?"

"Few human beings are stronger than temptations, child," he said melodiously; "and yours must have been many."

"I used to want you to think me better than I am. Now I—I do and I don't. Oh, I can't explain!"

Digitized by Google

"You are showing me your heart—you need not spell it."

"I suppose what I mean really is that I want you to know me as I am, and yet to like me just as much. I wonder if you would?"

He laid a gentle hand upon her shoulder. "Why not put me to the test?"

"I daren't," she said.

"Am I so hard?"

She shook her head, silently.

"What then?"

"I'm so bad," she whispered. She drooped a little nearer to him.

"Why do you say such things?" cried the Bishop; "you hurt me!"

"Haven't you met other sinners?"

"I would have had *your* past free from sin."

"Oh, my past?" she sobbed, and bowed herself in his arms. "My past is past—I'm sinning now!"

Much may be done by earnest endeavour, and he persuaded himself that his embrace was episcopal.

"My child," he murmured at last, soothing her tenderly, "I will not affect to misunderstand what you have said—it would be a false kindness to you. Nor will I be guilty of concealing the transgressions of my own heart. Were I a

Digitized by Google

younger man, I might doubt the righteousness of owning that the attachment is mutual; but the years bring wisdom and at my age we see deeply. My duty is to help you, and I realise that I can help you only by a perfect candour. I acknowledge, therefore, that you are indeed most dear to me."

"Oh, you are great!" she exclaimed. "I shall see you still? Promise you'll come here—don't let me lose you! Say it! Say again you love me!"

"You are indeed most dear to me," repeated the Bishop, who thought this way of putting it sounded more innocent. He got up and paced the room with agitation. "You ask me if I will still come here. I do not disguise from myself that many might think that I should answer 'no'; many might hold it my duty to desert you in the conflict that must be waged, to leave you to bear the brunt of it alone. I am not one of them. Flight is at best the refuge of a coward. Doughtier than to flee temptation is to confront and conquer it." He swept the hair from his brow with a noble gesture. "I recognise that my highest duty is to share your struggles—to solace and sustain you. Yes, I will come! We have a mighty battle before us, you and I—and we will fight side by side, my comrade, till we win!"

Digitized by Google

In other words, he ventured to go to tea there all the same, and had whisky-and-soda when it wasn't tea-time.

II

How much of what the Stage Door Club said about them was fact and how much of it was fiction, is a thing that could be decided only by the Bishop or Miss Clarges—neither of whom is to be consulted on the subject. But the Rev. Baker Barling, who frequently dropped into the Club for the house dinner, or a game of poker, heard the gossip; and Baker Barling confided it to Mrs. Baker Barling; and Mrs. Baker Barling, whose wrath against the Bishop had in no way abated, manœuvered for the joy of condoling with the Bishop's wife.

Miss Clarges was paralysed one morning by a note in which "Mrs. Lullieton Meadows," mentioning that her husband was the Bishop of Westborough, requested the actress to receive her upon a matter of the utmost importance the same afternoon. The actress's first impulse was to be "out" when the lady called; her second, to telegraph to the Bishop for advice. The fear of driving Mrs. Meadows to extremities, and the thought that a telegram might fall into the wrong

Digitized by Google

hands, prevented her adopting either course. She could only pray for the ability to persuade the visitor that her suspicions were unfounded, and she felt sick with misgiving as the day wore on.

How extraordinary of the woman! Whether she meant to be offensive, or pathetic, what a folly of her to come! On the stage, of course, such scenes were usual, and Kitty Clarges knew exactly how she would have to behave there—that she would be first mocking, then attentive, and finally moved to repentance. But the theatre was one thing, and life was another. In real life it was preposterous of a person to seek an interview and plead for the return of a husband's heart; in real life it was impossible to return a heart, even if one wished to do it. And in this case, the wish was lacking; Miss Clarges was so infatuated by the Bishop that she had even been jealous to remember that another woman had a legal claim to him.

At the tingle of the bell, she caught her breath. She had never seen "the other woman," and mixed with her apprehension was a strong curiosity to know what his wife was like. "Mrs. Meadows," announced the maid. The actress turned to the doorway, trembling, and saw that the lady was a dowdy little woman with a dreary

Digitized by Google

face; she looked as if she lived at Tunbridge Wells.

"Mrs. Meadows—how good of you to call!"

Mrs. Meadows advanced awkwardly; it was evident that she was painfully embarrassed. "Miss Clarges? I hope I haven't put you to any inconvenience?" she murmured.

"It is an immense pleasure to me to meet you. Won't you sit down?"

For an instant the Bishop's wife hesitated. Then she sat at the extreme edge of a chair, and moistened her lips.

"My visit must appear very strange to you?"

"Most kind!" said Kitty Clarges. "How is his lordship getting on with his play? It'll soon be finished now, I suppose?"

"I daresay—I really don't know; I didn't come to talk about the play," Mrs. Meadows faltered; "I came because you might do more for me than anybody else alive! Miss Clarges, my husband is in love with you."

The start, the bewilderment in the eyes, was admirable. "My . . . *dear* Mrs. Meadows?"

"You need not trouble to deny it," said the lady quietly, "because he has acknowledged it to me. But that isn't all—you are in love with my husband."

"Are you here to insult me?" cried Miss Clarg-

Digitized by Google

es, rising. "I have the honour to be one of his lordship's friends, he has been pleased to discuss his comedy with me. Not unnatural, I think? Especially as I hope to produce the piece. As for . . . what you say, there has never been a word, a syllable—our conversation might have been phonographed for all London to hear." The indignation of her voice quivered into pain. "I wouldn't have had this happen for the world—I can't understand it!" She struggled with a sob, and suppressed it proudly. "It's cruel!"

"I don't wonder that he admires you," said his wife thoughtfully; "you have great talent. But I have seen one of your letters to him. Here it is!"

Miss Clarges gasped, and looked at it. She sat down again very slowly. "All right," she said. "I *am* fond of your husband! Well?"

"It was finding your letter that made me write to you. I heard weeks ago that he was mad about you, but the letter showed me that *you* cared for him. Oh, I know that I oughtn't to have written! I considered a long time before I made up my mind. But there was so much at stake, I thought you might help me. If you will listen——"

"What for?" exclaimed Miss Clarges. "What's the use of my listening? Even if I promised you

Digitized by Google

not to see him again—I wouldn't promise it, but if I did—would it make him any fonder of *you?* Do you think, if *I* lost a man, I should beg the other woman to give him back to me? I should know she couldn't do it; I should know I might as well beg her to give me back—my innocence. And I shouldn't reproach her, either! I'd reproach myself! I should call myself a fool for not holding my own. Women like me *don't* lose the man they want—we know how easy it is for him to leave us, and we take the trouble to keep him. It's you good women who are always being left; after you've caught the man, you think you've nothing more to do. Marriage is the end of your little story, so you take it for granted it *must* be the end of his. The more you love him, the sooner you bore him. You go bankrupt in the honeymoon—you're a back number to him before you've been married a month—he knows all your life, and all your mind, and all your moods. You haven't a surprise in reserve for him—and then you wonder he yawns. Great heavens! To hold a man's interest, show him your heart as you pull out a tape measure—an inch at a time. I adore your husband; I venerate him! My guilty love has made me a purer woman. You can't realise that—I don't expect you to realise it; but surely you must know that—if you

Digitized by Google

wept and went down on your knees to me—I couldn't say, 'Because the right's all on your side, he shall never think about me any more'?"

"You misunderstand the object of my visit," said Mrs. Meadows meekly. "I didn't come to weep to you; I didn't come to beg you to say that he should never think about you any more. I came to beg you to tell me what you find in him to love."

"Eh?" ejaculated Miss Clarges.

"I came to beg you to tell me what you find in him to love," repeated the elder woman in plaintive tones. "You see, to you he is only an episode; but unless I choose to make a scandal—and I have daughters to consider—*I* must expect to spend many more years with him. If you will help me to discover some attraction in him, it will make life far easier for me."

Kitty Clarges sat staring at her dumbly. "You f-find no attraction in him?" she stammered at last.

"It is unconventional of me to admit it to you; but, as I say, there is so much at stake—I feel justified in asking your assistance. To me he is tedious beyond words to tell. If you would explain why you adore him, if you would show me some merit, some spark of talent, or wit, or humour, something to make his pretensions less in-

Digitized by Google

tolerable—you don't know how thankful to you I should be."

"Your husband is a great man." She spoke with a touch of uncertainty.

"Oh, no! And I should be foolish to ask so much—a moderately intelligent man is all that a woman like me has the right to expect. The Bishop is unfortunately very, very dull. Believe me, I have tried most conscientiously to be deceived by him. I used to read his Press notices and say, 'Look what the newspapers say about him—it *must* be true!' But I knew it wasn't. I used to listen to his sermons—there aren't many of them; they've been the same sermons for twenty years—and say, 'What lovely language, what noble thoughts! How proud his little Mildred should be!' But, though I was a young girl then, I knew that the lovely language was all sound and no sense, and that the noble thoughts came out of the *Dictionary of Quotations*. O Miss Clarges! you are a brilliant woman, far, far cleverer than I—he must have some stray virtue that my earnest search hasn't brought to light or you couldn't gush so romantically about him. Help me to see it! Think how he wearies me—tell me what the virtue is!"

The actress was breathing heavily, her nostrils fluttered; on her bloodless cheeks the delicacy of

Digitized by Google

"Maiden-bloom" stood out in unbecoming blotches. To hear that she idolised a man whom this little provincial in last's year's fashions disdained as a bore, robbed her of speech. She had not believed there could be such depths of humiliation in the world.

Some seconds passed, while the suppliant watched her wistfully.

"If you don't care for your husband, I'm afraid I couldn't teach you to love him."

"No, no; I only thought you might help me to put up with him; I'm not unreasonable—I'd be grateful for small mercies. If you'd mention a ray of interest in him, I'd keep my eyes on that, and make the most of it. . . . You're not vexed with me for coming?"

"Oh, not at all; I—I suppose you've been very . . . amiable, our interview has been rather quaint; I'm sorry I can't oblige you."

"Well," sighed Mrs. Meadows, "it can't be helped. But I must say I'm disappointed! When I found out there was a woman in love with him, it simply amazed me! I felt it only right to consult you—it seemed such an opportunity to improve matters at home. Still, there it is, if you can't tell me, you can't!" She was very downcast. "Then I'll say 'Good-afternoon.' "

Digitized by Google

"May I offer you some—tea?" quavered Kitty, clinging to the mantelpiece.

"Thank you so much, but I'm afraid I must be going now; I promised to see our Secretary at the office of the Mission Fund at four o'clock. Good-bye, Miss Clarges. You needn't tell the Bishop that I called. It has been quite useless."

She sighed herself out.

Now, though Kitty Clarges endeavoured to persuade herself by turns that Mrs. Meadows was a fool incapable of appreciating her husband, and that Mrs. Meadows was a diplomat scheming to disenchant her with him, both endeavours were unsuccessful. She could not think the woman an utter idiot, and still less was it possible to think her a genius. Kitty Clarges was less entranced by the Bishop in their next meeting. Between them lurked a dowdy little figure, regarding her with astonished eyes. The astonishment shamed her as no homily could have ever done. The figure was present at all their meetings, and often she lost sight of the Bishop's classical features and could see nothing but his wife's eyes wondering at her. His eloquence was no longer thrilling—she was obsessed by the knowledge that it wasn't good enough for the woman in the *modes* of Tunbridge Wells.

Before long the sight of her own dove-coloured

Digitized by Google

gowns began to get on her nerves, and gradually she discarded them. Once, when the Bishop proposed to visit her, she told him that she would be lunching out. A few days later she wrote that unforeseen circumstances denied her the hope of producing his comedy. His urgent letter of inquiry remained unanswered. When he called for an explanation she was "not at home."

Digitized by Google

A REVERIE

REBECCA is in the bedroom, dressing; and Lucy, who looked very sweet in her simple frock, has gone to some entertainment at her school. So I am alone. It's a comfortable chair; and the room is quiet, though overhead I hear my wife as she moves to and fro between the wardrobe and the toilet-table. She has heavy feet. I am glad she is going to the Jacobs's; it'll be a treat to me to spend the evening by myself. What a fine fire I've made up; and my cigar tastes better than usual! . . . Rebecca gets fatter every day. And she has such a silly laugh. But a good woman! Few women would have done so much as she did. I ought to remember that. But, instead, I am always remembering——

Quite clearly I can see the room I lived in, fifteen years ago, with Dora! How cheap it was —wonderful! But with its refinements too; she could make such pretty things. Why did I not marry Dora? My parents would have been horrified if I had married a Christian—I cannot think of any other reason. Unless it was because she didn't worry me with entreaties. She never

Digitized by Google

spoke of it. . . . She had been so poor and friendless; she may have fancied that it would be ingratitude to ask for more than I had done? And the business was my father's in his lifetime; I could not afford to quarrel with him. She must have known that? She must have known I could not afford to quarrel with him, even if I had been enxious to marry her?

Fervently, though it is all past and the shrub that was planted on her grave has grown big beyond the railings, I hope she did not grieve! I have wondered many times—since. She was so gentle and so pure, that perhaps she often suffered, while she smiled and kissed me? . . . And she died and was buried. And the child—the baby Lucy—was given to strangers to be nursed. How long ago it seems—in another life. But I wish that Lucy might have called me "Papa!" . . . My cigar is out.

Rebecca: she was slimmer when her family made up the match between us. Yes, and good-looking. And my sorrow for Dora had faded—two or three years had passed. I was my own master then, and business was good. . . . I was happy with Rebecca. I gave her lots of diamonds, and the other women envied her; and at home we got on very well. If we had had children of our own— I wonder!

Digitized by Google

Lucy was four when Rebecca took her. She asked no questions; to this day she has never asked me anything. It shows a big heart. She is like a mother to Lucy. Shall I ever forget how grateful I was! The tears came to my eyes when she said "yes." She should be worshipped for such a generosity. But Lucy reminds me so of Dora!

Not at first—ah, no; just a little thing not able to talk plainly! It is recently that I see the resemblance. She is fourteen now, and with every move she brings back Dora before my eyes. She has the same features, the same trick of smiling sometimes with the mouth a little to one side; she grows more and more like Dora. I look at her across the table, when she and my wife and I sit at meals together, and my throat gets tight. The past is suddenly alive to me, and I want to spring up and throw my arms round her neck. But Rebecca might guess the truth, and it would pain her to the heart if she suspected. Yet it is true—and I can't help it—that in the child who reminds me of the dead so vividly my wife has a rival here in our home. It is the child that she consented to adopt who reminds me innocently that my wife is fat and silly; it is Lucy, who, as I watch her at her lessons, recalls to me the thoughtful face of the girl I used to love. And

Digitized by Google

I regret! Ah, God forgive me, I regret with all my soul, and would be young once more, with Dora by my side; I would see her by my side to-day! . . . How hot it is! the window should be open such a night. . . . Rebecca has come downstairs. She wears her black satin, and powders her nose again before the mirror. She persuades me to accompany her; I shall be "dull alone"?

"My head aches. Otherwise—— By-by, enjoy yourself, my dearest!"

Digitized by Google

THE RECONCILIATION

I HAVE often said that I could not be your wife, but I would never tell you why. To-night, suddenly, I want to tell you why, I want to write to you. I wonder if you will understand.

You have heard how my marriage ended. For many months after I divorced him I could concentrate my thoughts on nothing but my wrongs. I had no child, no interests; the hurricane of pain and jealousy swept me day and night. Then resentment grew less vehement—faded into lassitude. By very slow degrees I concerned myself with other things.

Later, I began to dwell on scenes of my brief happiness with him, and though remembrance made me cry for the irrecoverable, to remember was sweet. Moments which had been trivial while they lasted assumed in retrospect an air of exquisite companionship. It was my weakness to recall some commonplace incident and indulge myself by reanimating its minutest details; the hours that I lived most vividly were the hours that I lived in looking back.

Even when I found pleasure in society again,

Digitized by Google

recollection remained a secret joy. I could forget by this time and amuse myself, had my vanities and vexations, was socially like any other woman, entertained in ordinary ways, but clandestinely I still revisited the past. So thirteen years went by—and, unsuspected by my dearest friends, I communed mentally with a young husband, who, in these reveries, had grown no older.

I tried to bear in mind that he was older—much older than I—but I could think of him only as I had seen him last. I repeated, marvelling, that he must be over forty now, but in my memories I laughed and talked with the personality that I had known. Although I told myself that I might pass him unrecognised, the face that I smiled to in my visions was the face of the young man that he used to be.

I believe you have sometimes wondered who your rival was. He was the man that my divorced husband once had been.

Last September I was at Pourville. One morning in the hotel, glancing at an English paper, I read that he had just arrived in Paris. I meant to leave for Paris, myself, towards the end of the week, and I sat thinking how very soon he and I would be passing through the same streets. Doubtless we had drifted close to each other

Digitized by Google

many times before, but I had not known it, and somehow— Well, the impulse was very strong, I wrote to him!

"I do not know," I wrote, "whether it will please or distress you to hear from me. If my letter is unwelcome, burn and forget it. Speaking for myself, all ill-feeling died long ago. Time has even taught me to think of our first year together and obliterate the rest. Our marriage was a blunder, but—so much am I changed from the girl who was your wife—that seems to me, to-day, no reason why we should never meet again as friends. I shall be at Meurice's on Saturday. If a reconciliation would not be odious to you, if there is no one to resent it, will you come to see me?"

When the letter was posted, I said that I had committed an imbecility, but I am not sure that I believed myself. At any rate, I rejoiced half an hour afterwards. By-and-by, of course, I was sorry again. And so on. Then, on the morrow, something happened—I found his new volume of poems on a chair in the courtyard. Have you ever read any of his poems? But I suppose poetry is not in your line, you great, strong, practical builder of big bridges? On the fly-leaf he had scribbled, "To Janet Herbertson, from her sincere friend, Gilbert Owen." I had picked up

Digitized by Google

the book eager to read some of it, but I fell to dreaming over the fly-leaf, wondering who Janet Herbertson was.

While I wondered, she returned to her seat.

"Have I taken your book?"

"Oh, thank you!"

She was a girl to whom I had already spoken once or twice; I had not known her name, and I don't suppose that she knew mine. I call her a "girl" because she was unmarried, but she could not have been more than four or five years younger than myself—a girl with a fine figure and abundant health, but, to my mind at least, no features worth mentioning. Her eyes were shallow, and her hair came near to being sandy. Most of her remarks were prefaced by "Of course," and she expressed herself in very incisive tones. I had noticed her one day with an easel among the gorse at Varangeville Plage, and I set her down as an amateur, with means.

"You didn't go to the Links, then?" I said.

"Not this afternoon, I was too much interested in this. Have you read any of it?"

"No, I only just saw it. It's a new one of his, isn't it?"

"It isn't out yet at all; this is what's called an 'advance copy'; Mr. Owen sent it to me yesterday."

Digitized by Google

"I couldn't help seeing by the inscription that you knew him. How very nice to receive such compliments from poets!"

"Of course you admire his work?"

"I admire some of it very much."

"Some of it?" She regarded me with an offensive smile.

"Of course, the best in any art is always unintelligible to the Public." I was certain she was an amateur now, the arrogance was unmistakable.

"I suppose so."

"Emerson— Have you read Emerson?"

"Whom's it by?" I asked viciously. I saw her shudder.

"Emerson was one of the world's teachers. A propos of the impressions to be derived from Nature, he said that a tourist could never take away from any place more than she brought to it. Of course it's the same with a reader; if she hasn't the receptivity, she can't receive."

This person educating me! But I wanted to hear about him; I submitted.

"I think I follow you," I murmured.

She unbent. "If you like I'll lend it to you presently?"

"I should be delighted, if you can spare it?"

"Yes, I shan't read after dinner. In the evening you always play that idiotic game, though,

Digitized by Google

don't you? Well, you can have it in the morning."

"If you're sure I shouldn't be robbing you?"

"Quite. Besides, I've read most of it already, in manuscript."

"Really? It must be very fascinating to know a poet so well as that!"

"Oh, I know Gilbert Owen *very* well! If you're staying next week, you'll see him here;" she tittered self-consciously: "I've told him that the rest would do him good."

"Here?"

"Yes, but not till Wednesday; I didn't want him till I had finished my picture. Of course, I shan't have much time for my work after he comes."

"I shall be gone by then," I said. "What a pity! I suppose there's no chance of his coming before?"

"Oh, no, he'll come on the day I fixed."

"Wednesday?"

"Yes."

"To oblige me, you might let him come a little sooner," I laughed.

"I'm afraid I can't do that. You had better stay."

"I wish it were possible. You must be immensely proud of your influence?"

Digitized by Google

"Oh, I don't know. I find myself quite forgetting he's famous, and thinking of him simply as a dear friend."

In a pause I glanced at her left hand. There was no ring on it, but I knew that she foresaw one there. She turned a page of his book, and for a minute or two we didn't speak again. Across the begonias the musicians in their red coats were fiddling drowsily, and, inside, the croupier called "Numéro deux!"

"What's he like?"

"Eh? Oh, it's so difficult to say what anyone is like. Do you mean his appearance, or his disposition?"

"I think I meant his disposition. Amusing?"

"Amusing? No, I should scarcely describe him as 'amusing.' Of course he can be very brilliant when he meets a foeman worthy of his steel, but his nature is a wistful one. He has suffered deeply, and it has left its mark."

"I think I remember reading something," I said. "Wasn't there a case of some sort?"

"He made a very unhappy marriage years ago," she said sharply; "his wife was a vapid girl who didn't understand him. He was very much to be pitied."

I nodded. I could have struck her across her conceited face.

Digitized by Google

"It must have been hideous," she added, "for a man of his intellect to be married to a fool."

The begonias were making my eyes ache. "Awful," I muttered. I wondered what in the world he could find to admire in her. "Well, you shall be left in peace. I've a sudden fancy for Cinq. It's my lucky number."

I didn't play. I sat watching the horses swirl, and hating her—hating my idiocy in having written to him. I was jealous. Is it heartless of me to say that to you, dear man? I must be frank. I was jealous of her, and when I had the honesty to own it at last, I was glad that the letter had gone. I asked myself if she had more attractions than I; I asked myself—it was abominable, you'll despise me!—if I couldn't teach him to humiliate her.

There was no note for me at Meurice's when I arrived on Friday, but I had an instinct that he would come next day. I spent the whole of Saturday morning before the mirror, I wonder my maid didn't give me notice; I had my hair dressed in a new way, and snapped at her till she cried before I was satisfied with it. Afterwards I decided that it didn't suit me, and my hair was done as usual, after all. The same with my things, I felt myself a sight in everything—my frock had to be changed three times.

Digitized by Google

It was four o'clock wnen the waiter came up and frightened me. My knees were trembling, and the doorway was a blur.

"Gilbert!"

"Nan!"

"I'm glad you've come," I got out, in a horrid dry whisper. We shook hands. He was speaking, but I had turned deaf; I heard a confused sound and strained to distinguish what he said. His face grew clear to me before his words. I saw blankly that he was like someone with a resemblance to the husband I had remembered. "I'm glad you've come," I repeated. It encouraged me to find that my voice was louder. I didn't feel that he was Gilbert. He was someone queerly familiar, but I didn't feel that he was Gilbert.

"It was very good and generous of you." His voice seemed different, too. "You haven't changed so much."

"Ah!"

"Really! How are you?"

"All right. Won't you sit down?"

He twitched his trousers to save their bagging at the knees. It may have been mechanical, but it hurt me that he could do it then.

"You've been at Pourville?"

"Yes. Only for a little while."

Digitized by Google

"I've never stayed there. It's very quiet, isn't it?"

"Oh, a mite of a place, just the hotel and the sea. There are beautiful walks, though."

"You used to be fond of walking."

"I am still."

"You're looking wonderfully well."

"You look very well, too."

"Do you think so?" he asked. "Fact? Not so much older as you expected?"

"N—no," I said.

"My hair's going, eh? begins a little further back than it used to, doesn't it?"

"A little more intellectual brow, perhaps! You should try a specialist."

"I've tried a dozen. They're no use. The first time you go, the man tells you that you'll be bald directly if you don't use his lotions. 'Ah, humph! Well, I'll do all that *can* be done for you.' And you buy bottles at half-a-guinea each, and find they make no difference. Then, when you go again to say there isn't any improvement, he exclaims, 'My! I didn't hope to do so much in the time. This is splendid. *Look* at all that new hair coming up!' Of course you like to believe him, and you go on buying his rubbish for twelve months. A hair specialist lives by his knowledge of human nature, not his knowledge of the hair."

Digitized by Google

I knew that he was talking for effect and I laughed, to gratify him. He glanced round the room.

"You're very comfortable here."

"Yes; this is where I generally stay."

"Are you often in Paris?"

"Not very often; I'm in London a good deal."

"*I* never go to London, excepting to see a publisher; the atmosphere is fatal. In London I'm commonplace. Positively. The murk gets on my genius. Give me a blue sky and God's sunshine! All artistic natures are very susceptible to external influences. You know that?"

"I remember you used to say so."

"It's just the same with me now; I haven't altered, I feel just as I felt when I was a boy. I'm young—just as young in myself. That's what keeps my work so fresh, that's what people rave about. Other men's stuff ages; mine doesn't —everybody says so—the spirit of it's as youthful as when I was twenty. Temperament—temperament!"

I sickened at the word; formerly that had been his apology; to-day, I saw it was his boast. Presently I inquired about his favourite sister, if she was well. "I don't know, I don't often see her now," he said indifferently. I spoke of a chum he had lost, a man at whose death I had pictured

Digitized by Google

him grief-stricken. "It must have been an awful blow to you?" I asked. "Oh, he had got rather tedious," he answered; "Charlie was a bit of an ass." He proceeded to tell me an anecdote of a woman who had paid him a fulsome compliment. While he aimed eagerly at making an impression—while his sole thought was to show me how brilliant and fascinating he remained—he revealed to me that every tendency I had once condemned had developed to a salient feature of his character, that every blemish I had once regretted had grown to be a glaring fault.

I am sure that vanity would have urged him to gain my admiration, even if he had found me faded and a frump; I am sure that he had come with that desire; but his eyes told me he found me charming, and his note, by-and-by, I think, was unpremeditated.

"I wish I had been worthier of you," he said. He said it very beautifully, but late. So much too late to give me any pleasure!

"Don't let us talk about the past," I murmured.

"My coming here to-day will make me regret it more still."

"I hope not—I didn't mean to give you pain. Perhaps it was foolish of me to write."

"Ah, you know I am glad you wrote. Only—

Digitized by Google

It won't be the last time I see you? Don't say that." His gaze dwelt on me sentimentally. "I wish it were the first! If I had just been presented to you, we might have become great friends, Nan. Who knows?"

"I trust we *are* friends."

He sighed. "It's noble of you to say so, but the 'friendship' you can give me now is only a gentler name for 'pardon.' I might have looked forward to something sweeter if we had just met, I might have won your esteem, your confidence —perhaps even your love. I wonder if you know what it has meant to me this afternoon, to be here like this—with a wall of formality between me and the woman who used to be my wife? The torture, the shame of it! My heart is full of emotion, but I may only speak to you of trivial subjects; I want to pour out my remorse at your feet and feel your arms about me in forgiveness, but I may only touch your hand, like a stranger. When we parted, I was a boy, who ruined his own happiness; to-day I am a man, and I realise what I've lost."

"You make me miserable."

"Every day I have thought of you. My life —empty! What is anything without you?"

"You mustn't talk to me like this."

"I can't help it. Nan, I'm so wretched!"

Digitized by Google

"It's my fault for making you come here."

"No, no. But let me see you again. Tell me I may come to-morrow."

"I can't."

"It's Sunday—let us lunch at Versailles, or Saint-Germain, or somewhere—let us go into the country. I know a perfectly lovely spot we can motor to in an hour, and the hotel is really quite decent. Say you will!"

"I'm expecting people to-morrow."

"Well, Monday? Tuesday? You'll be free on Tuedsay?"

I shook my head.

"Then Wednesday? I was going to the sea on Wednesday. but I'll stay. Promise to spare me Wednesday."

How easy it had been! I saw the sandy-haired girl's mortification, saw her fuming, week by week, while he dangled at my side. My petty plan had triumphed—but it brought no joy.

"I am leaving Paris," I said. And when he went, I think he was conscious that, after all, his visit had been a failure.

But he was speedily at ease again, I know, for those who have no deep affections avoid much of life's unhappiness. For the selfish is the peace. The suffering was for the woman who had felt—for me, to whom the reconciliation had proved

Digitized by Google

more painful than the estrangement—for me, whom reality had robbed of a dream! Always I had seen him as he had been—now I could see only the man he had become. Our meeting had killed Remembrance; I could spend hours in the past no longer. I tried, I tried for months, but the spell was gone. The husband of my youth would come to my mind no more—I met only a middle-aged poseur, from whom I turned and fled.

Best of men, how I seem to you I do not know, but I have owned the truth. There is nothing more for me to write. Excepting—well, all day long I have wished that you were with me, and I am feeling very much alone.

Digitized by Google

THE CALL FROM THE PAST

ONCE there was a prosperous solicitor, and he had two sons. The elder he took into his office; the younger he sent to the Bar. The younger boy's name was Robert, and he was generally called "Bob." The elder boy's name was Edward, and no one ever called him "Ted."

Edward went to the office with satisfaction. He was a shrewd youth who made useful friends, and didn't allow pleasure to stand in the way of profit. Before he had been in the business two years he bullied the head clerk, and it was predicted that he would "go further than his father." Bob entered his profession negligently. He was a genial fellow who liked bohemian clubs, and wrote farces that were never produced. Before he had been at the Bar two years he succumbed to an unconquerable passion and went on the stage.

The stage had not then become the smartest vocation in England. Viscounts occasionally married dancing-girls, but socially that was as high as the theatre had climbed. It may be difficult for English people of to-day to credit it, but

Digitized by Google

though old Mr. Blackstone was simply a solicitor, he felt humiliated when his son "took to play-acting." What will be understood more easily, is that he was wrathful in thinking of the money he had wasted to make a barrister of a crank. He told the crank that he washed his hands of him, and as a matter of fact talked rather like the irate parents in the comedies in which Bob was going to perform.

Nevertheless his growl was worse than his bite —in which he resembled the comedy parents again. Ascertaining that Bob's salary was to be fifteen shillings a week, and that the histrionic career was precarious, he undertook to make an annual contribution of forty pounds, payable quarterly, for the term of three years. "At the end of which time," he said, "I think you ought to be able to support yourself, if you have really any aptitude as a buffoon."

Barring the "buffoon," Bob was of the same opinion. Don't laugh at him, he was young. He slammed the door of his chambers rejoicing, and —because his father wished him to change his name—he dropped the "Blackstone" and called himself "Lawless." The old man remarked that "Senseless" would be better still, but Bob thought not.

Now if this had been a nice, edifying story,

Digitized by Google

with a Moral presented gratis to every purchaser, Bob would have had only two courses open to him. He would either have succeeded brilliantly and moved his father to tears of pride, or he would have found the discomforts unbearable and returned repentant. In reality he didn't succeed at all, and he had never been so happy in his life.

His sole regret was that the tour was short, for when it finished he was out of an engagement. He remained out of an engagement much longer than he had been in one, and subsisted on the parental allowance. The change from the fleshpots of Regent's Park was severe, and if anything could have cooled his stage fever, it would have been cooled now, but it defied even semi-starvation. By-and-by he obtained another small part, and his temperature was higher still. Confidently he assured himself that by the time the allowance was withdrawn he would be independent of it. And that was where he erred.

At the end of the three years he was pacing the Strand. He had had hard luck, and old Mr. Blackstone was hard too. He stuck to his guns; Bob must shift by his own abilities henceforward, or Bob must go back to the Bar. Bob was footsore, hungry and penniless; Bob went back to the Bar.

Of course there was still his pen. His hopes as

Digitized by Google

an actor had been shivered, but to his ambitions as a dramatist he clung. His pen was the spar in the shipwreck. The night was black, but afar the footlights beamed. Buffeted as he was, he might regain them by his pen.

So he wrote more farces—farces and burlesques, and one or two melodramas as well. His father did not know that. Robert Blackstone, the budding barrister, preserved appearances; and Robert Lawless, the panting playwright, preserved his manuscripts—for they all came back. All, that is to say, with the exception of a farcical comedy which he had actually sold for twenty-five pounds but which had never been staged. Some of his work was good, but in England the chief qualifications for artistic success are commercial ability, and the money to exploit it; Bob lacked both. By degrees he became weary of trying to reach the limelit shore, his struggles grew fainter; by degrees "Robert Lawless" took some interest in Robert Blackstone. He thought of the Bar more, and of the Theatre less. One day when his father told him he had "handled the brief uncommonly well," he was elated. He was nine and-twenty now.

Robert Blackstone had begun to cut "Robert Lawless" out—was travelling faster, proving the better of the pair. And "Lawless," who felt

Digitized by Google

rather sore about it at first, presently forgave him. Bob began to look less like a Bob and more like a Robert. People noticed "what a strong resemblance there was between him and his brother." As an earnest young barrister he no longer frequented bohemian clubs. It was understood that one mustn't go round to Plowden Buildings any more and waste his time. Nobody said to him now, "Come and have a drink, old chap!" Occasionally someone might say, "Will you—er—take a glass of sherry, Mr. Blackstone?"

As the years passed, even that was seldom said. He had shaken off the dust of Plowden Buildings, and had chambers in Garden Court. His humour was becoming heavy. The mothers of marriageable daughters found it convulsing. He was spoken of as a man with a future, and dined at dreary houses. Old Blackstone died, and as Robert was making a handsome income he was mentioned in the will with abundant generosity. Wherefore he was rich. So was Edward the solicitor, who had a wife and three children now. Edward was proud of his brother; he wanted him to take silk, and to stand for Beckenhampton later. Robert was thinking of these things himself. His age was forty-one. And here ends the prologue.

Digitized by Google

So we see that this unedifying story may be said to begin at a point long after all orthodox stories have concluded—it really begins twelve years after the prodigal reformed. Reformation, we know, is always final—in stories. When the prodigal has once returned to the odour of sanctity we are quite sure that he will never desire change of air; we understand that he will always be just as good and peaceful as we leave him on the last page. Human nature is made like that—in stories.

One May afternoon, as Robert came out of court, a man murmured to another, "He's a dry stick, is Blackstone!" and Robert overheard, and smiled his dry smile. Yes, he supposed that was his social reputation at the Bar. As he joined Edward, and listened to his pleased comments on the Jury's finding, he even admitted to himself that the reputation might be deserved. Odd! how very different from a "dry stick" he had been once.

Edward was animated—for Edward. He kept nodding his grey head, and pinched his nose repeatedly between his forefinger and thumb, a habit that he had in conversation. They stood talking in the street for about ten minutes. It occurred to Robert with a touch of faint surprise that he had long ceased to shirk his brother's

Digitized by Google

company; yet there was no doubt that Edward was quite as dull a dog as he had ever been. As they talked there, outside the Law Courts, Robert compassionated himself a little for not being bored by Edward.

He had been cheerful as he unrobed, but the remark he had caught lurked in his ears, and when he entered his chambers he found himself repeating it. "For the defendant," a pleasant phrase to-day, was momentarily forgotten; "a dry stick" sounded in his mind instead. He, "Bob," had actually become a "dry stick"!

And he was only forty-one. He lit a cigarette, and mused. Beyond the open window the flowers of the garden were bright in sunshine, and the fountain tinkled dreamily. There was a nursemaid with a child among the flowers; he wondered, for a moment, whether he would have done well to marry.

Marvellous, in looking back, how suddenly success had come!—marvellous to remember how hard he had had to flog his brain at the beginning to earn a legal guinea; if one managed to turn the second corner at the Bar at all, one sped on with a rush. But how unlikely it had looked that he would ever turn that corner!

How unlikely it had looked in the days when he belonged to the Amity Club and fellows used

Digitized by Google

to quote his jokes he flashed over a tankard and a steak at three in the morning! If his boyish hopes had been justified, if he had had talent as an actor, perhaps life would have tasted better to him, after all? "Robert Blackstone, K.C." He would soon be that. "Robert Blackstone, K.C., M.P."? He might expect it. "Sir Robert Blackstone, Solicitor-General"? It was on the cards. Why wouldn't his heart swell at the prospect, why didn't he catch his breath, what the deuce had become of all his emotions?

Oh! he was getting sentimental, listening to the fountain. Shut the window, ring the bell, see what briefs had come in!

"And a letter, sir."

"All right," said Robert, "put it down."

The eagerness with which he used once to seize his briefs—the swift glance to learn the fee, the impatience to gather the contents! Other incomes, other manners—he pulled the tape off leisurely to-day. "'A dry stick'!" he reiterated. Oh, one had to pay for success, there was no doubt.

His gaze wandered to the letter, and rested on it, startled; a little quiver ran through him. For several seconds a sensation that was half pleasure, half pain, held him quite still. The letter had been redirected from Plowden Build-

Digitized by Google

ings. It was addressed to "Robert Lawless, Esq.,"—c|o himself!

"T. R., HETTON-LE-HOLE,
DURHAM, *May 1st.*

"DEAR SIR,—I have come across the scrip of your farcical comedy entitled *No Flies on Flossie,* all rights of which I acquired some years ago. It is a bit antique in parts now, and I think you might like to bring it up to date. I am putting it on at O.H. Ashton-under-Lyne to see how it shapes. We rehearse at P.O.W. Manchester. The first Call is for twelve o'clock, Monday, 18th inst.—Yours faithfully,

"CAVENDISH PINK."

When the colour had crept back to his face, Robert laughed—the perfunctory laugh that he gave to a Judge's joke. He shrugged his shoulders. He put the letter down, and laughed again—he was acting to himself unconsciously. After a minute or two he picked it up and re-read it. How had Cavendish Pink come by the play? "Acquired" it? Not from the author. But the adventures of the manuscript were unimportant. Pink? Pink had been a rather popular comedian. On the see-saw of life Mr. Pink had gone down while Mr. Blackstone went up.

For the third time he read the letter. He

Digitized by Google

knew that "T.R." stood for "Theatre Royal," but the other abbreviations had mystified him. It recurred to him with emotion that "O.H." meant "Opera House," and that "P.O.W." meant "Prince of Wales's." That he could have forgotten these things even for a moment! He drummed his fingers on the briefs, and saw his Youth.

Of course he could have nothing to do with the matter. *"No Flies on Flossie*—the work, we understand, of Mr. Robert Blackstone, the well-known barrister," etc. He shuddered in imagining such a paragraph. He said that it was lucky "Robert Lawless" was forgotten; certainly "Robert Lawless" would reveal nothing to anyone who saw the piece at Ashton-under-Lyne, and doubtless its "run" would begin and end there. If he were silent, nobody would suspect his connection with it. But—well, if this had happened a few years earlier, he would have gone down to the place, just for a day, to see the performance. He said he would have felt curious about it—a few years ago!

Three or four hours had passed before he confessed to himself that he was curious now. He was in his library after dinner; and though he had no intention of humouring his curiosity, he humoured his mind. It dwelt on scenes in the

Digitized by Google

farce that had appeared to him brilliant when he wrote them. Would they appear brilliant to-day? He remembered the evening when he scribbled "Curtain," and Dick turned up and heard the last act read. "Jove! I didn't think you had it in you," Dick had said; he was sitting on the window-sill—how it all came back!—how time flew! The score of hopes and disappointments the work had brought; with what passion he had despaired at that age! Could he despair so passionately at this? And then the excitement when the thing was taken—what a whirlwind of exultance! That night that he got the news. He had dragged Dick out for oysters just before Scott's closed, and afterwards they had sat up talking till daylight. The piece was to be produced a few weeks hence, and Dick had stipulated for *two* stalls on the first night, to take his girl. . . . Thirteen years ago! And Dick was dead.

On the morrow Robert decided that he might, after all, run down to Ashton-under-Lyne. He said he would not enter the stage-door, no one should surmise that the author was present; he would simply take a seat in the dress circle like anybody else. Why not? To associate himself with *No Flies on Flossie* was impossible, but to resist the desire to peep at it would be motiveless.

Digitized by Google

No doubt when he was in the theatre he'd be hotly ashamed of having perpetrated such trash. Still——

He made no reply to Cavendish Pink. He was not prepared to revert to comic dialogue, even under a pseudonym, nor did he see his way to correspond on the subject. Probably it would be inferred that the letter had gone astray, or that Mr. Lawless had died. Well, he *was* dead. Yet Robert Blackstone owned to himself that he regretted being unable to attend Bob Lawless's rehearsals. He did not own it all at once, he regretted it for some time before he owned it. Then he said again that if this had happened a few years earlier, he might have— Eh? Just for a day or two? Yes, he would have given himself the fun then! It wouldn't have mattered so much a few years earlier.

How ardently, in the period when he was a small-part actor, he had looked forward to striding about a stage as the author and telling the company what to do! He had never rehearsed in a West End theatre, or he would have known that authors are rather small fry after the plays are written. It had been his dream. The author! And of course he would be privileged to smoke— he had imagined himself with a cigar between his lips, and his hands in the pockets of a fur over-

Digitized by Google

coat. In his dream it was generally winter, because he wanted to wear a fur overcoat. Nice girls waylaid him in the wings, and said, "Do write in a line for me to speak, Mr. Lawless, *please!*" And he did. The courtly consideration that he had always shown—in his dream—to the humblest members of the cast! The glowing terms in which everyone had spoken of him—in his dream! . . . It would have been agreeable to go to Manchester for the rehearsals.

About a week later he said that of course he wouldn't be so stupid, but that as a matter of fact he *could* go if he chose; he could go as "Mr. Lawless"! It was in the highest degree unlikely that anyone in a third-rate provincial company would know his face. He wouldn't do it, because he had long ago left such follies behind, but there was really nothing else to prevent him.

"The first Call is for twelve o'clock, Monday, 18th instant." Constantly the man thought of it, sometimes he fingered the letter again; daily, in the drawer of his desk, under the documents, under the briefs, it tempted him—the Call from the past.

Oh, out of the question!

He supposed it *would* be a folly?

After all, should he go?

If the Easter Term did not end on the 16th of

Digitized by Google

May, there would have been no story; but it does.

He felt strange to himself when he took his ticket on Sunday. He felt excited, nervous, guilty. On the platform he avoided a man whom he knew. He realised the sensations of a fugitive from justice, and threw an apprehensive glance about the restaurant car. What should he say if he were asked where he was going? He was sorry the rehearsals were to be held in a big city like Manchester; what more likely than that an acquaintance would run against him in the street? As to the hotel, it would brim with danger: at any moment someone might exclaim, "How d'ye do?—what has brought *you* here?" But, to be sure, he merely meant to remain in an hotel for the night—on the morrow he would go into lodgings. They would be extremely uncomfortable, but at all events they would be private, and it was only for a week, after all. A week would soon pass. He found himself wishing that it had passed already.

Rain was falling when he arrived at Manchester. He spent a melancholy evening in the "smoke-room." Presently he saw a theatrical paper, and turning it over, observed advertisements of "professional apatrments"; several of the advertised houses were in Manchester. The idea of installing himself in theatrical lodgings again

Digitized by Google

carried a little tremor with it; but it was not unpleasant. These addresses to his hand, moreover, would spare him trouble.

Rain was falling when he shaved. No matter —it would be well to make his arrangements before he went to the rehearsal! He breakfasted briskly, opposite a commercial traveller who performed extraordinary feats with a knife and fork. At ten o'clock he had his bag put on to a cab. "All Saints," he said, for in Manchester all theatrical landladies and All Saints are neighbours.

The side streets of All Saints were not prepossessing. As he rang the first bell, he glanced about him wonderingly. Had he really been happy in places like this when he was young? He was relieved when the slatternly householder answered that she had only a "combined room." He interviewed several householders without success.

Gradually the manner in which he made his applications lost something of its legal stiffness; he laboured for a touch of the old-time freedom which he knew was demanded by the situation. He rang another bell, and a young woman in curling-pins came to the door.

"What rooms have you got this week?" asked Robert, uneasily familiar.

"What do you want?" said the woman.

Digitized by Google

"I want a sitting-room and bedroom," he said. And she was able to accommodate him.

Against the piano was a pile of comic songs; on the mantelpiece there were likenesses of performers in tights. The rooms were cosily furnished, and the rent was ten shillings a week inclusive of gas and fires; the Manchester weather was still chilly.

"I'll take them," said Robert.

When he had unpacked his bag, he smoked a cigar in the parlour, and smiled. "One always returns to one's first love," he mused; and really the first love looked attractive, though he viewed the signboard of a "mechanical chimney-sweep" through the window.

Presently he asked his landlady for her card.

"I'll have to give you my professional card," she said, "but it has got the address on it; I'm in the profession myself."

He read, "Mdlle. Superba: Terpsichorean Gymnast."

"That's me," she said, pointing, "that portrait there. I only let rooms as a 'obby—I don't let regular all the year round. Think it's good?"

"It doesn't flatter you," said Robert. But she was captivating in her gymnast's costume; he would never have supposed the photograph was

Digitized by Google

meant for her. "I'm fortunate to find you 'letting' this week."

"Well, it's like this, it gives me something to do when I'm at home. That's what my husband says; he says, 'It gives you something to do.' And I don't take ladies, they're a bit too much—'Can we 'ave some 'ot water, Ma?' all hours of the day; 'Can I come and 'eat my curling-tongs in the kitchen fire, Ma?' Ladies are a handful, and, as I say, I only let as a 'obby. I'm going on tour again in August. Perhaps you've seen me in the Halls?"

"I've often applauded you in the Halls," he said, courteously untruthful; "I was puzzled why your face was so familiar to me." He was conscious that he hadn't recovered the note yet, he knew that he was being much too formal. Could he pluck up the spirit to call a landlady "Ma" again himself?

There was an unaccustomed exhilaration in his veins as he drove to the Prince of Wales's; he did not define the feeling, but what he felt was "younger." When the cab jerked to a stoppage, his pulses beat like a lover's. He leapt out, and saw "Stage Entrance" painted on a dirty door. Again he pulled a stage-door open. "What name?" he was asked; "Mr. Lawless," he answered. And all at once he did not know if he

Digitized by Google

was happy or ashamed; but he knew that he trembled.

The theatre looked dark for the first minute. He received a dim impression of ill-dressed people, drew a breathful of mouldy atmosphere that swept him back into the past. A vociferous man shook hands with him, and called him "my boy." "So you've turned up, my boy! That's all right. Afraid you hadn't had my note."

"How do you do, Mr. Pink," responded Robert.

They sat down in the stalls swathed in holland wrappers, and the mist before him melted. The ill-dressed people acquired features; he realised that the rehearsal had begun, and that the figures on the stage were the butler and the maid-servant reading the opening scene of his farce.

"It wants freshening up, Lawless," said Mr. Pink; "it's a bit Noah's Arky here and there—old-fashioned. Still I think there's stuff in it. I'd like you to keep your ears open, see where you can stick in some lines. Make it modern, my boy, make it a bit topical; you know what I mean?"

"Oh—er—of course," said Robert with dismay. "Yes, certainly I must see what I can do."

He was painfully embarrassed; he had not felt so nervous since the day he heard himself pleading in court for the first time. When the vocif-

Digitized by Google

erous man left him, he thanked Heaven. Vaguely he thought of making his escape, of sending a telegram to say he was recalled to town.

"Mr. Lawless?"

A pale, shabby girl had come to him. She had very beautiful grey eyes; he was surprised that he had overlooked her.

"Yes?" he said.

"I'm to play 'Flossie'—I wanted to ask you a question about her. Is she simple in the first act, or only putting it on?"

He had no longer any views on the subject, but it would never do to say so.

"Simple," he said. "Oh, decidedly simple in the first act."

"That's what I thought!" she nodded, "and Mr. Pink wants me to do it the other way—Mr. Pink says she is only putting it on."

He perceived that he had encouraged her to defy the management.

"Of course," he added hastily, "when I say 'simple,' I mean relatively simple—everything is relative."

"Oh, y-e-s," she said. But she was evidently at sea. After a moment she went on, "What I really want to know is how she is to speak those lines sitting on the hamper—is she sincere in that speech or isn't she?"

Digitized by Google

"That, of course, is the question," murmured Robert. "Yes, precisely. That speech is the—the——"

"It's the keynote to the part," she said.

He wished distressfully he could remember what speech she meant. Perhaps, after all, he had better be frank!

"To be quite honest with you," he said, "I wrote the piece a good many years ago; and since then I——"

"Oh, I see!" she laughed. "How funny! Since then you've written so many others that you've forgotten what it's about?"

"Exactly," said Robert; "that is to say, not at all. I haven't written any others, but I *have* forgotten what it's about."

They regarded each other silently for a moment. . . . She seemed a singularly nice girl.

"I was quite a young man when I wrote it," he said abruptly.

"And you've done nothing since?"

"Well—er—not in the dramatic line. You're rehearsing my last attempt."

"Oh, I do hope it'll be a success!" she said earnestly, "then you'll go on working. It must be rather—rather queer to see us rehearsing a piece you wrote so long ago?"

"It is," said Robert, "very queer." He paused

Digitized by Google

again—he was again abrupt: "Once I knew every line of the three acts by heart."

She lifted her eyes to him gravely, and didn't speak for a second. He liked her for not speaking—he saw that she understood.

"How it must take you back!" she whispered.

He sighed—and smiled. "So, you see, Mr. Pink probably knows more about your part today than the author does.—Er—you needn't tell all the company what I've said."

"As if I should!" she exclaimed. "Oh! there's my cue, I must fly!"

"Miss Wilson!" shouted Pink. "Come on, Miss Wilson, please—take up your cues!"

"My fault," called Robert, "*I'm* to blame."

She looked back over her shoulder, smiling at him as she ran, and somehow the rehearsal was more interesting to Robert. The nice girl read the lines he had invented thirteen years before—and listening to her, he remembered.

Rain was falling when the rehearsal finished. She hadn't an umbrella. "Which way do you go?" he asked as the stage-door slammed.

"All Saints," she replied; "Rumford Street."

"That's my way, too. I want a cab—I can give you a lift."

"A cab?" She was openly astonished. "If

Digitized by Google

you *must* squander money, you can take a penny car. But why not walk?"

"Is that what you do in the wet?"

"Well, if I took a cab every time it was wet in Manchester, my salary wouldn't go far, would it?"

"I have no idea what your salary is."

"Three pounds," she said frankly. "It isn't much for a leading lady, eh?"

"It isn't much for a leading lady, but it's a good deal for a young girl. In any other business three pounds a week wants a lot of earning."

"Oh, I know," she said. "I've got young brothers in the city. They call me 'the millionaire of the family.' "

"Do they like your being on tour alone?"

"Well, you see, it was necessary for me to earn my own living; things weren't very bright at home when I grew up. I don't spend all my salary on the delicacies of the season—I send half to my mother every week. I couldn't be any help to her if I were in a clerkship like the boys.

"But you're fond of the stage, aren't you? You sounded enthusiastic when you floored me with those questions."

She shrugged her shoulders. "At the beginning I was in love with it; I've been in the pro-

Digitized by Google

fession eight years now. You're giving me all your unbrella."

"There's no expense attached to that," said Robert.

The cars were full, and she was evidently averse from a cab; so they went along Oxford Street afoot, keeping close together.

"I suppose you'll go and see a show to-night?" she inquired.

"I hadn't thought of it," he said. "Shall *you?*"

"There's nothing else to do when one isn't playing. It's ghastly sitting in diggings all the evening, isn't it?"

"It must be dull if you're alone," he assented. It occurred to him that his own evening was going to be very dull indeed.

"Oh, I'm not alone, I'm with the girl who plays 'Aunt Rachel'; but it's dull anyhow. We thought of asking for seats at the St. James's."

"I—I think',' said Robert, "that I'll go, too. Perhaps I shall see you there. Or we might all go together, mightn't we?"

"Why, yes," she replied, "it would be very nice. Let's!"

"It would be delightful!" said Robert. "Yes, let's!"

They had reached her door, and she asked him if he would go in and have some tea. He said he

Digitized by Google

would. They found the other girl at home, toasting crumpets. Miss Wilson toasted crumpets. Robert toasted crumpets also. They all knelt on the hearthrug and toasted crumpets together. His hostesses cried that they were "rising in their profession, having the author to tea!" He laughed. He cracked a joke. He wondered what Edward would say if he could see him.

At the St. James's the girls obtained two stalls for nothing, and Robert insisted on paying for one, though Miss Wilson reproved him for such waste of money. "We could quite easily have asked for three," she said. "It *is* silly of you! You make me angry."

Greatly daring, he proposed supper when the performance was over. The restaurants of Manchester were far to seek, but he didn't know that; he even told himself that it mattered nothing if he were recognised; the girls were ladies, a man had a right to take his friends to supper! However, they wouldn't go; that is to say, Miss Wilson wouldn't go; the other girl looked as if she wanted to. Miss Wilson said he must wait to see if his piece was a success. "If it makes a hit, well—perhaps!" He understood that she took it for granted he was poor—she wouldn't let him be extravagant: the situation was not without a charm.

Digitized by Google

They chattered gaily as far as her apartments. "I can't ask you in after the show," she murmured.

"No, I know," he said—"I remember!" As he strolled on, he reflected that the day had been remarkably agreeable. He made for his lodging in high good humour. In Oxford Street he started, he received a shock, almost he staggered—he had perceived that he was whistling!

The terpsichorean gymnast gave him eggs boiled to perfection in the morning, and much better coffee than he got at home. As he tapped the second shell, it occurred to Robert that he had not opened a newspaper yesterday. Extraordinary! How often he had winced in recollecting that he never looked at a newspaper when he was a provincial actor! And actually he had been as bad again. He bought *The Manchester Guardian,* and other papers after breakfast—and kept glancing at the clock.

It was rather jolly to sally forth to rehearsal, though when it was time to go, rain was falling. He entered the theatre with zest to-day. Even he resented less stiffly the vociferous man's calling him "my boy." Miss Wilson's pale face smiled at him as at a friend. He conversed with one or two other members of the company, and saw his way to inserting a topical allusion in the

Digitized by Google

dialogue. Pink pronounced it "devilish good." Robert the Reviving was gratified that Pink thought his line "devilish good." When he was asked vociferously if he would "come across and have a drink," he didn't say "no." They drank prosperity to the piece in a vulgar bar. And he took back a box of sandwiches, and Peggy Wilson, and "Aunt Rachel," and he shared them in the stalls.

Almost the next thing that Robert realised vividly was that it was Friday. Rain was falling. It amazed him how the interval had flown. "Aunt Rachel" had gone over to Bury, where her fiancé was playing at the Royal, and Miss Wilson, left alone, was coming in to tea. Robert had ordered cream with the tea, and simnel cake. He stood at the window eager-eyed; the signboard of the "mechanical chimney-sweep" did not obtrude itself to him. He remembered how long it was since he last watched for a girl to come to tea.

But when she turned the corner he remembered only that he was to have a gracious afternoon. He wheeled the armchair to the hearth for her, and brought her a footstool. She was less talkative than usual. Somehow the first few minutes were disappointing.

Digitized by Google

"I have to go on Tuesday," he marked presently; "and then it'll be all over."

"But you're coming to Ashton-under-Lyne for the production?"

"I don't know; I don't know that I shall be able to. I wish I hadn't to go back—I haven't enjoyed anything so much for years. By the way, I want you to do me a favour—I want you girls to come to supper with me on Monday night. I thought we might go and see a show"—he didn't notice that he was saying "show" again, instead of "theatre"—"and have a little supper here afterwards. I'd suggest a restaurant, but there'd be no time to eat anything before we were turned out."

"What would your landlady say?"

"I've sounded her. I said, 'I suppose you wouldn't think there was any harm in my bringing two ladies in to supper after the show one evening?' 'Certainly not, Mr. Lawless,' she said. 'Would you like it hot?' That's a landlady that *is* a landlady. Will you?"

"We'll see about it," said Miss Wilson.

"You might say 'yes,' " he begged. "Give me a happy memory for the end."

"But it won't be the end; we shall often see you, shan't we, if the piece runs?"

Digitized by Google

"Perhaps it won't run. And even if it does—I'm a busy man."

"Too busy to think of your pals? What do you do?"

"Are we pals?" he questioned. "I'm yours; but are you mine? Really? You've known me such a very little while."

"No longer than you've known me."

"It's not the same thing, though. You meet lots of men; I don't meet lots of girls. To me this week has been quite out of the common; to you it's only one of the fifty-two."

"What do you do in London?" she inquired again. "What are you?"

"A dry stick," said Robert.

"Well, you aren't a dry stick in Manchester!" she said.

It was not a brilliant reply, but she couldn't have made one that would have pleased him more.

Yet the tea was a failure. She never ate cake, she told him; somehow she didn't care for tea either this afternoon—she sipped about a quarter of a cupful. He had scarcely stirred his own when she was declaring she must go: "You won't think it rude of me if I run away now?" He gave her her muff blankly. A creature of moods, as changeful as an April day! But when she was

Digitized by Google

sunny, *how* sunny! The table looked pathetic to him when she had gone. He stood at the window, downcast; the signboard of the chimney-sweep darkened the road.

Mademoiselle Superba put the simnel cake on the top of the piano, because there wasn't a sideboard, and it stood there uncovered till it was dusty. Then the night of the supper arrived, and there were a galantine, and prawns in aspic, and a mayonnaise; and the first thing the creature of moods did when she came in was to pounce on the dusty cake and devour a slice before she took her hat off.

"Peggy!" exclaimed the other girl reprovingly.

"I may?" she cried, flashing a glance at Robert. Yes, she knew she might! She knew she might do anything she chose there. "I'm going to have more light!" she said, and lit another burner of the gaselier.

Mademoiselle Superba—majestic in black silk, with pendent pearls in her ears, and her hair dressed like Truefitt's window—looked in for a moment to ask if all was well. Robert thanked her for doing it so extremely well. Peggy said sweetly, "I hear you're in the profession too?" The woman was pleased at that. So was Robert—it was nice of Peggy. Because there was no sideboard, cutlery and plates were set forth on

Digitized by Google

the piano; because there were no champagne glasses, they drank the champagne out of tumblers.

"Didn't I forbid you to be extravagant?" cried Peggy.

He liked "forbid." "Forgive me!" he smiled.

"This once," she laughed. "But you must be very economical in London."

"I shall have no parties like it in London, I assure you."

"Nor I!" said she.

"Do you live in London?"

She threw him a nod. "Crouch End."

"Tell me more," he urged. "And let me give you both some salad."

"More? Well, once we had a servant. Now we haven't. I do housework when I'm at home —I blacklead the grates. That's why my hands aren't pretty."

"Don't," he said, pained. Her hands weren't pretty, but he revered them now he knew the reason.

"Peggy!" said the other girl, dismayed. The other girl was obsessed by "manners" when she was out.

"I'm frightfully untidy in the morning. In novels the poor heroine always has on 'snowy cuffs and collars' with her rags. Pickles! In

Digitized by Google

real life the poor heroine has to think of the laundry bills. Oh, you'd be shocked at me in the morning! After the boys have gone, I turn a room out sometimes—my skirt pinned up, and a duster over my head. Can you see me? Mother's not very strong—the cooking's business enough for mother. Then I go up to the agents' and try to get something to do. In a *very* smart costume! with a picture hat—I made it!—and white gloves. Oh, you'd be impressed by Peggy in the afternoon; you wouldn't recognise me in the Strand. You're not seeing my best clothes here, don't think it—I'm in an engagement, I'm stopping the expenses!"

"Peggy!" groaned the other girl again. He divined a kick under the table. "You're coming down to see the dress rehearsal on the 5th, Mr. Lawless?" she struck in.

"It would be a treat to me, but I can't; I've somewhere else to go."

"It would be a 'treat' to him!" pealed Peggy. "We shall be kept in the theatre half the night—we shall be dog-tired—and *he* would find it a 'treat'! What it is to be young! Where have you to go, Mr. Dramatist?"

"I have to go to a very dull public dinner on the 5th," he said. "I shall think of you dog-

Digitized by Google

tired in the Garden Act when they serve the *chapon rôti.*"

"Send us the *chapon rôti,*" she said, "it'd be much more use." She snatched a sprig of parsley from a dish and stuck it in her hair. "Mother always tried to kill my passion for dress!" she cried.

He proffered her mayonnaise, and she said she wanted to play the piano. Though he feared that even a landlady who was a terpsichorean gymnast might have objections to her rattling "Florodora" at one in the morning, his spirits were high until she forsook the music-stool and sank to reminiscence on the hearthrug. Then she made his heart ache; she told him some of her vicissitudes—no engagement, no money, no food. His eyes filled as he listened. What this girl had been through!

It was two o'clock. He saw his guests home. (Rain was falling.) "Good-night—good-bye." He looked at Rumford Street for the last time—how familiar it had become! "Don't forget me," he heard himself whisper, clasping Peggy's hand. Her gaze assured him. She went in—the step was desolate; he turned thoughtfully away.

And as he walked back, to the room where she had been, he knew he was in love—with her, with the Theatre, with the life he used to lead. In the

Digitized by Google

wet, black streets of Manchester he saw the naked truth, and he realised that his life was a failure. A man could change his environment, but not himself. He felt that he would be happier earning three pounds a week, like her, on the stage than he would ever be as Robert Blackstone, K.C. One mustn't say these things, but he felt it—felt that he would rejoice to be a minor actor again, and see Peggy in the morning, and see Peggy every day.

No Flies on Flossie tottered for six nights, died, and was buried. You may read those facts elsewhere. These are facts concerning *No Flies on Flossie* which you may read only here. And in Garden Court, Temple, there was for a long time a distinguished barrister debating a subtle point. He questioned if, when he made a trip to the past and grew enamoured of it, he fell in love with a girl, or only with an atmosphere. Because that he *was* in love, still in love, was indisputable; he looked back constantly and yearned. The sole doubt was, with *what* was he in love? It was the weak spot in the case, and with his usual keenness he had put his finger on it—he discerned how liable he was to be deceived, how naturally he might be attributing to the girl the fascination that belonged to the surroundings. If it was the atmosphere that lent Peggy enchantment, he

Digitized by Google

would be insane to choose a wife so different from, say, the placid matron who blessed Edward. *Per contra,* if he loved Peggy herself, why should he tramp the room like this, instead of asking her to marry him?

He swore he did love the girl herself.

He trembled lest her halo was the limelight.

Then having come to a conclusion, he found her advertisement in *The Stage,* and wrote asking her to call on him "at Mr. Blackstone's chambers."

She went promptly. The dignified clerk ushered her into Robert's presence, and Robert had never seen that room look so gay.

"How good of you to come!" he exclaimed happily.

"How good of you to think of me, you mean!" she said—"I've been out ever since *No Flies* finished; have you written another piece, and are you going to offer me a good part in it? I say, you do know swells!"

"Who, Blackstone?"

She nodded. "Do you think he'll come in while I'm here? I was reading about him the other day —Miss Peggy Wilson would be going strong, meeting celebrities of the Bar. This *is* the Blackstone, isn't it, the K.C.?"

Digitized by Google

"He's a very recent K.C.," murmured Robert; "there's his new wig in that box."

"Oh, do let me look!" she said, darting radiantly. "May I?"

"You may even try it on, if you like," said Robert; "he wouldn't mind."

She had her hat-pins out in a second. "Oh, *isn't* Peggy going strong!" she laughed. "How does it suit me?" And then turning from the strip of glass, "Why are you so grave all of a sudden? Didn't you mean me to?"

"Yes, yes; I was thinking what a fool I had been not to beg you to come sooner," sighed Robert. "Take it off, and let me talk to you."

"Serious?"

"Very serious—an engagement."

"You *are* a trump," she said; "I wanted one so badly."

"Ah, but you mustn't accept this one unless you like it, and I hope you won't mind its being a short engagement. Peggy, I love you. I love the ground you walk on, and the clothes you wear, and everything you say and do. Will you be my wife?"

"Oh!" she gasped. Her face was colourless.

"Can't you care for me?"

"I do care," she whispered, and— It seemed incredible, yet they were round her! and his heart

Digitized by Google

was thumping like a boy's. "Oh, my sweet!" he stammered, releasing her at last. Just like a boy again—"Oh, my sweet!"

And her colour had come back, and she smiled up at him, with the smile that no other woman had ever equalled. "Let me put on my hat before Blackstone comes in," she said joyously; "look what you've done to my hair—it'd give us away!"

"Peggy," said Robert; "*I'm* Blackstone."

The smile faded; she stood gazing at him wide-eyed.

"I called myself 'Lawless' when I wrote that farce, and then I chucked writing and went in for the Bar. I had forgotten all about the thing for years when I got Pink's note, but I couldn't resist going down to the Call; I went as a lark, nobody knew me, I thought it wouldn't make any difference. And then I met *you,* Peggy—and it made all the difference in the world. Why don't you laugh?"

"You are a great man," said the girl solemnly; "you oughtn't to marry me."

"Oh, my dearest dear," he cried, "don't you understand that I—the real 'I'—am the man you saw there, and that only you do see the real 'me'? London has forgotten the author of that piece, but he didn't die, darling—his heart's just the same, though he looks so different. Robert

Digitized by Google

Blackstone's the man who wears the wig and gown, and can make things right for your mother and the youngsters, and who'll give you a title by-and-by, my love; but your husband'll be the bohemian who toasted the crumpets, and lodged at mademoiselle Superba's, the terpsichorean gymnast. You shan't have time to wish for anything—I'd like to buy the Earth for you!—and you must come to hear me speak, and I want you to be proud of our position; but at home I shall always be the 'boy' who fell in love with you, Peggy, the 'Bob Lawless' who went to look for his youth—and found it!"

Beyond the open window, the flowers of the garden were bright in sunshine, and the fountain tinkled dreamily. There was a nurse-maid with a child among the flowers; he knew with thanksgiving that he was doing well to marry.

"Will you kiss me again, sweetheart?"

"Yes," she said—*"Bob!"*

THE END

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google

This book should be returned to the Library on or before the last date stamped below.

A fine of five cents a day is incurred by retaining it beyond the specified time.

Please return promptly.

Digitized by Google

Digitized by Google